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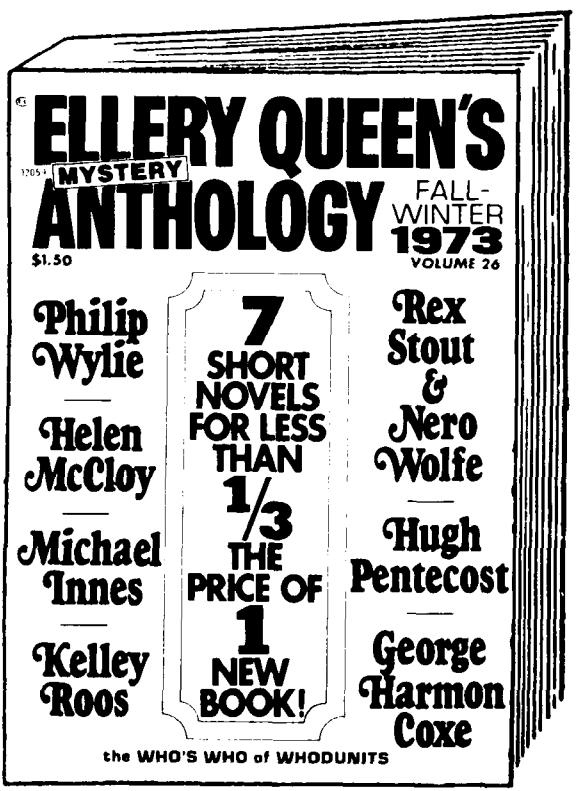

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

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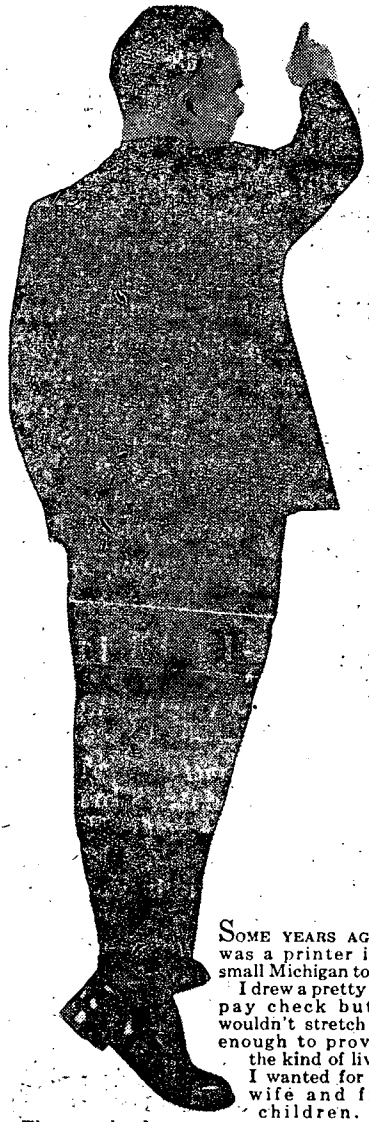

SOME YEARS AGO I was a printer in a small Michigan town.

I drew a pretty fair pay check but it wouldn't stretch far enough to provide the kind of living I wanted for my wife and five children.

Then one day I was reading a magazine just as you now are and I saw an ad. It intrigued me. It offered me the steadily growing income I had always hoped for. It said I would have greater security and personal independence . . . and that's what I had been wanting.

I was a little skeptical, but I said to myself, "for a postage stamp I can find out." So I mailed the coupon. In a few days, I got a letter with a booklet that gave the whole story. It opened my eyes. I could see why owning my own business was so much easier than I had always thought . . . why the day to day guidance of a successful worldwide organization could assure my own success.

I read the booklet several times. It just seemed too good to be true. I talked it over with my wife. We decided that **now** was the time to make the forward step . . . there was no reason to keep postponing an income increase.

So, I applied for a Duraclean dealership and I was accepted. I stayed with my job . . . ran a few ads . . . sent some mailings . . . contacted a few stores and told my friends about the superior services I was now equipped to give them. Evenings and Saturdays, I rendered the service. As the business grew, I added servicemen.

I found that I didn't have to develop a single idea myself. Every step had been prepared for me and pre-tested. Hundreds of other men had already proven my methods successful.

It didn't take long to see that I was making three to four times (yes, 3 to 4 times) as much per hour in my own business as in my printing job. So, after only seven months with a good following of customers, I quit my job to go full time on my own. In the meantime, I had enjoyed all this extra income on top of my salary.

Each day, we realized what a **serious** mistake not mailing that coupon would have been . . . and how that little act that seemed so trivial at the time actually changed our lives.

The steadily growing income brought us many things we could not afford before. My efforts were so much more productive. I scheduled my time to my own liking. When we wanted a day or two off, we took it. I worked hard but, if I wanted to be home early or quit at noon, I did.

I became so enthusiastic about this business and so appreciative of what it had brought my family that, whenever a man opened a dealership near me, I helped him get a quick start.

The company learned about this and had each new dealer in my section of Michigan spend a day with me. One day the president of Duraclean Company asked me how I would like to move to Headquarters and spend my entire time helping dealers to increase their sales and profits.

That was good news to my ears. Since then I have worked with hundreds of our dealers in their own towns and at regional meetings, con-

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step by step thriving business

present job, would $21 profit per hour?

by Bob Ferrel

ventions and dealer group meetings.

Incidentally, I sold my dealership at a good profit. If for any reason a dealer wants to sell, we maintain a service to locate buyers and help him sell.

Our job here at headquarters is to show each individual Duraclean dealer how to use his own abilities to bring him greatest success.

It's Easier than You Think To Build Your Own Business

If you've wanted to BE YOUR OWN BOSS... to become financially independent and have a fast growing income, now YOU CAN. And you own a Nationally Advertised business.

You can stay at your present job while your customer list grows . . . then switch to full time, lining up jobs for your servicemen to do. One job a day brings a good starting income.

If you hire two servicemen (full or part time) while you keep your job, the national price guide provides you a gross profit of $14 an hour on their work and this is much easier to do than you think. **We show you how . . .** step by step. That's $490 for a 35 hour week.

Your gross profit on three servicemen is $21 per hour. An efficient Duraclean dealer can gross $7 per hour on EACH serviceman plus $12 an hour on any service he himself renders. The 24 page illustrated booklet we'll mail you (with no obligation) explains how most of your gross profit becomes **clear net profit.** Your income is limited only by the number of servicemen you employ.

You can operate from a shop, office, or your home. Equipment is light and portable.

At the start, you may want to render service yourself . . . or you can start with full or part time servicemen. This business is easy to learn . . . easy to start . . . so easy to service that women dealers do it. We prefer you have no experience . . . not have to "unlearn" old ways.

We are NOW enlarging this worldwide system of individually-owned service businesses. If you are reliable, honest and willing to work to become financially independent, we invite you to mail the coupon.

When you receive our illustrated booklet, you will see the way we show you **step by step** how to quickly get customers . . . and still more customers from their recommendations.

You have 7 superior services that are rendered "on location" in homes, offices, hotels, theaters, clubs, motels and institutions.

These are not ordinary services. You have the prestige and endorsement of leading furniture makers and carpet mills, of National Magazine editors, of Research and Testing Laboratories.

National magazine advertising explains superior merits of **your** services, builds **your** customer confidence and brings job leads to **you.**

Stores, upholsterers, insurance adjustors, and decorators refer jobs to our dealers. These year 'round services are in constant demand.

Start Small, Grow Big in this Booming Business

Many men have said to us, "I can't afford to give up my job till I know I have a sure thing . . . a sound business that will provide both security and a better living for my family."

That made sense to us so we worked out such a plan . . . and those same men are now enjoying a Duraclean dealership in many communities. You don't experiment. You use **tested, proven** methods. You have **our backing and "know how."**

Does this appeal to you? Don't decide now. Mail the coupon so you'll have the facts to decide wisely. There is no obligation. You'll then know whether this is what you want.

You can start small and grow big. A third century ago Duraclean was an idea . . . but it caught fire and spread to a world wide service.

Our first service, the care of upholstery and carpets not only cleans, it enlivens the fibers . . . revives dull colors. Pile rises with **new life.** There's no harsh machine scrubbing. No soaking. Mild aerated foam lightly applied lifts out dirt, grease, many unsightly spots like magic. Furnishings are used again in a few hours.

Government figures show service businesses are **growing faster** than industries and stores . . . $750 million yearly potential just in rug and furniture cleaning. Your **6 other services** are explained in the free booklet we'll mail you.

Little over $1000 establishes YOUR OWN business. A day's profit more than pays the monthly payments we finance for you.

It is surprisingly easy to learn this business. You can decide from the information we will send you whether to apply for a dealership. So, with **no obligation whatever,** mail the coupon TODAY. Cut it out NOW so you won't forget to mail it.

Mail this coupon TODAY
It may put you in business

Duraclean International
4-042 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Ill. 60015

With no obligation, mail 24 page illustrated booklet telling how and why I can quickly increase my income and family security **while still employed,** how you'll help finance me. No salesman will call.

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet's 19th caper—and in at least two respects you will find this exploit different from the 18 previous adventures. But as before Nick is still accepting assignments to steal only the valueless—that is, things valueless to most people and certainly not worth Nick's fee (in this case) of $30,000; and Nick is still forced to detect before he can collect . . .

THE THEFT OF NICK VELVET

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"It's for you, Nicky," Gloria yelled from the telephone, and Nick Velvet put down the beer he'd been savoring. It was a lazy Sunday afternoon in late winter, when the snow had retreated to little lumps beneath the shady bushes and a certain freshness was already apparent in the air. It was a time of year that Nick especially liked, and he was sorry to have his reverie broken.

"Yes?" he spoke into the phone, after taking it from Gloria's hand.

"Nick Velvet?" The voice was deep and a bit harsh, but that didn't surprise him. He'd been hearing that sort of voice on telephones for years.

"Speaking."

"You do jobs. You steal things." A statement, not a question.

"I never discuss my business on the telephone. I could meet you somewhere tomorrow."

"It has to be tonight."

"Very well, tonight."

"I'll be in the parking lot at the Cross-County Mall. Eight o'clock."

"How will I know your car?"

"The place is empty on a Sunday night. We'll find each other."

"Could I have your name?"

The voice hesitated, then replied. "Solar. Max Solar. Didn't you receive my letter?"

"No," Nick answered. "Your letter about what?"

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"I'll see you at eight."

The line went dead and Nick hung up the phone. He'd heard the name Max Solar before, or seen it in the newspapers, but he couldn't remember in what context.

"Who was that, Nicky?" Gloria appeared in the doorway, holding a beer.

"A land developer. He wants to see me tonight."

"On Sunday?"

Nick nodded. "He needs my opinion on some land he's buying near here. I shouldn't be gone more than an hour." The excuses and evasions came easily to Nick's lips, and sometimes he half suspected that Gloria knew them for what they were. Certainly she rarely questioned his sudden absences, even for days at a time.

He left the house a little after 7:30 and drove the five miles to the Cross-County Mall in less than fifteen minutes. There was little traffic and when he reached the Mall ahead of schedule he was surprised to see a single car already parked there, near the drive-in bank. He drove up beside it and parked. A man in the front seat nodded and motioned to him.

Nick left his car and opened the door of the other vehicle. "You're early," the man said.

"Better than late. Are you Max Solar?"

"Yes. Get in."

Nick slid into the front seat and closed the door. The man next to him was bulky in a tweed topcoat, and he seemed nervous.

"What do you want stolen?" Nick asked. "I don't touch money or jewelry or anything of value, and my fee is—"

He never finished. There was a movement behind him, in the back seat, and something hit him across the side of the head. That was the last Nick knew for some time.

When he opened his eyes he realized he was lying on a bed somewhere. The ceiling was crisscrossed with cracks and there was a cobweb visible in one corner. He thought about that, knowing Gloria's trim housekeeping would never allow such a thing, and realized he was not at home. His head ached and his body was uncomfortably stretched. He tried to turn over and discovered that his left wrist was handcuffed to a brass bedstead.

Not the police.

But who, then? And why?

He tried to focus his mind. It seemed to be morning, with light seeping through the blind over the window. But morning of which day? Monday?

A door opened somewhere and he heard footsteps crossing

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the floor. A face appeared over him, a familiar face. The man in the car.

"Where am I?" Nick mumbled through a furry mouth. "What am I doing here?"

The man leaned closer to the bed. "You are here because I have stolen you." The idea seemed to amuse him and he chuckled.

"Why?" The room was beginning to swim before Nick's eyes.

"Don't try to talk. We have no intention of harming you. Just lie still and relax."

"What's the matter with me?"

"A mild sedative. Just something to keep you under control."

Nick tried to speak again, but the words would not come. He closed his eyes and slept . . .

When he awakened it was night again, or nearly so. A shaded lamp glowed dimly in one corner of the room. "Are you awake?" a girl's voice asked, in response to his movement.

Nick lifted his head and saw a young brunette dressed in a dark turtleneck sweater and jeans. He ran his tongue over dry lips and finally found his voice. "I guess so. Who are you?"

"You can call me Terry. I'm supposed to be watching you, but it's more fun if you're awake. I didn't give you the last injection of sedative because I want someone to talk to."

"Thanks a lot," Nick said, trying to work the cobwebs from his throat. "What day is it?"

"Only Monday. You haven't even been here twenty-four hours yet." She came over and sat by the bed. "Hungry?"

He realized suddenly that he was. "Starving. I guess you haven't fed me."

"I'll get you some juice and a doughnut."

"Where's the other one—the man?"

"Away somewhere," she answered vaguely. She left the room and reappeared soon carrying a glass of orange juice and a bag of doughnuts. "Afraid that's the best I can do."

"How about unlocking me?"

"No. I don't have the key. You can eat with your other hand."

The juice tasted good going down, and even the soggy doughnuts were welcome. "Why did you kidnap me?" he asked Terry. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Don't know." She retreated from the room, perhaps deciding she'd talked too much already.

Nick finished three doughnuts and then lay back on the

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bed. He'd been lured to that parking lot and kidnaped for some reason, and he couldn't believe the motive was anything as simple as ransom. The man on the telephone had identified himself as Max Solar, and asked if Nick had received his letter. Since kidnapers rarely gave their right names to victims, it was likely the man was not Max Solar.

"Terry," he shouted. "Terry, come here!"

She appeared in the doorway, hands on hips. "What is it?"

"Come talk. I feel like talking."

"What about?"

"Max Solar. The man who brought me here."

She giggled a bit, and her face glowed with youth. "He's not Max Solar. He was just kidding you. Do you really think someone as wealthy as Max Solar would go around kidnaping people?"

"Then what is his name?"

"I can't tell you. He wouldn't like it."

"How'd you get involved with him?"

"I can't talk any more about it."

Nick sighed. "I thought you wanted someone to talk to."

"Sure, but I wanted to talk about *you*."

He eyed her suspiciously. "What about me?"

"You're Nick Velvet. You're famous."

"Only in certain circles."

Their conversation was interrupted by the opening of a door. Terry scurried from the room and Nick lay back and closed his eyes. After a moment he heard Terry return with the man.

"What in hell is this bag of doughnuts doing on the bed?" a male voice demanded. "He's conscious, isn't he? And you've been feeding him!"

"He was hungry, Sam."

There was the splat of palm hitting cheek, and Terry let out a cry. Nick opened his eyes. "Suppose you try that on me, Sam."

The man from the car, still looking bulky even without his tweed topcoat, turned toward the bed. "You're in no position to make like a knight in shining armor, Velvet."

Nick sat up as best he could with his handcuffed wrist. "Look, I've been slugged on the head, kidnaped, drugged, and handcuffed to this bed. Don't you think I deserve an explanation?"

"Shut him up," Sam ordered Terry, but she made no move to obey.

"You kidnaped me to keep me from seeing the real Max Solar, right?" Nick was guess-

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ing, but it had to be a reasonably good guess. The man named Sam turned on the girl once more.

"Did you tell him that?"

"No, Sam, honest! I didn't tell him a thing!"

The bulky man grunted. "All right, Velvet, it's true. I don't mind telling you, since you've guessed it already. Max Solar wrote you on Friday to arrange an appointment for this week. He wanted to hire you to steal something."

"And you kidnaped me to prevent it?"

The man named Sam nodded. He pulled up a straight-backed wooden chair and sat down by the bed. "Do you know who Max Solar is?"

"I've heard the name." Nick tried to sit up straighter, but the handcuff prevented him. "How about unlocking this thing?"

"Not a chance."

"All right," Nick sighed. "Tell me about Max Solar."

"He's a conglomerate. He owns a number of companies manufacturing everything from office machines to toothpaste. Last year while I was in his employ I invented a computer program that saved thousands of man-hours each year in bookkeeping and inventory control on his export and overseas operations. The courts have ruled that such computer programming cannot be patented, and I was at the mercy of Max Solar. He simply fired me and kept my program. For the past year I've dreamed of ways to get my revenge, and on Friday Terry supplied me with the perfect weapon."

Nick listened to the voice drone on, wondering where it was all leading. The man did not seem the type to resort to kidnaping, yet there was a hardness in his eyes that hinted at a steely determination.

"I'm a secretary at Solar Industries," Terry explained. "My office is right next to Max Solar's, and often I help his secretary when my boss is away."

Sam nodded. "Solar dictated a letter to Nick Velvet, asking for a meeting today. Terry brought me a copy, with a suggestion for revenging myself on Solar."

"You knew who I was?" Nick asked the girl.

"I had a boy friend once who told me about you—how you steal valueless things for people."

Sam nodded. "I figured up in the suburbs you probably wouldn't get Solar's letter till Monday—not the way mail deliveries are these days—but just to be safe I used his name when I phoned yesterday. See, I had

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to kidnap you and hold you prisoner till after the ship sails."

"Ship?"

"Solar was hiring you to steal something from a freighter that sails from New York harbor in two days."

"It must be something important."

"It is, but only to Max Solar. It would be worthless to anyone else."

Nick thought about it. "That's not quite correct," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"You can revenge yourself on Solar by holding me prisoner, or you can hire me to steal this object and then sell it back to Solar."

"Why should I hire you? I have you already!"

"You have me physically, but you don't have my services."

"He makes sense," Terry said. "I hadn't thought about that angle. If Nick steals the thing, you can sell it to Solar for enough to cover Nick's fee plus a lot more. You'd be getting back the money Solar cheated you out of."

Sam pondered the implications. "How do we know you wouldn't go to the police as soon as you're free?"

"I have as little dealing with the police as possible," Nick said. "For obvious reasons."

Sam was still uncertain. "We've got you now. In forty-eight hours Max Solar will be in big trouble. Why let you go and take a chance on ruining our whole plan?"

"Because if you don't, you'll be in big trouble too. Kidnaping is a far more serious crime than blackmail. Unlock these handcuffs now and hire me. I won't press charges against you. I steal the thing, collect my fee, and you sell it back to Solar for a lot more. Everybody's happy."

Sam turned to Terry. When she nodded approval he said, "All right. Unlock him."

As soon as the handcuff came free of his wrist Nick said, "My fee in this case will be thirty thousand dollars. I always charge more for dangerous assignments."

"There's nothing dangerous about it."

"It's dangerous when I get hit on the head and drugged."

"That was Terry. She was hiding in the back seat of the car with a croquet mallet."

"You knocked me out with a croquet mallet?"

Terry nodded. "We were going to use a monkey wrench, but we thought it might hurt."

"Thanks a lot." Nick was rubbing the circulation back into his wrist. "Now what is it Max Solar was going to hire me to steal?"

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"A ship's manifest," Terry told him. "But we're not sure which ship. We only know it sails in two days."

"What's so valuable about a ship's manifest?"

They exchanged glances. "The less you know the better," Sam said.

"Don't I even get to know your names?"

"You know too much already. Steal the manifest and meet us back here tomorrow night."

"How do I find the ship?"

"A South African named Herbert Jarvis is in town arranging for the shipment. He'd know which ship it is." Terry looked uneasy as she spoke. "I could go through the files at the office, but that might arouse suspicion. They might think it odd I took today off anyway."

"Shipment of what?" Nick asked.

"Typewriters," she said, and he knew she was lying.

"All right. But there must be several more copies of this ship's manifest around."

"The copy on the ship is the only one that matters," Sam said. "Get it, and we'll meet you here tomorrow night at seven."

"What about my car?"

"It's in the garage," Terry said. "We didn't want to leave it at the Mall."

Nick nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow with the manifest. Have my fee ready."

The house where he'd been held prisoner was in the northern part of the city, near Van Cortlandt Park. It took Nick nearly an hour to drive home from there, and another hour to comfort a distraught Gloria who'd been about to phone the police.

"You know my business takes me away suddenly at times," he said, glancing casually through the mail until he found Solar's letter.

"But you've always told me, Nicky! I didn't hear from you and all I could imagine was you were hit over the head and robbed!"

"Sorry I worried you." He kissed her gently. "Is it too late to get something to eat?"

In the morning he checked the sailing times of the next day's ships in *The New York Times*. There were only two possibilities—the *Fairfax* and the *Florina*—but neither one was bound for South Africa. With so little time to spare, he couldn't afford to pick the wrong one, and trying to find Herbert Jarvis at an unknown New York hotel might be a hopeless task.

There was only one sure way to find the right ship—to ask

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Max Solar. He knew that Sam and Terry wouldn't approve, but he had no better choice.

Solar Industries occupied most of a modern twelve-story building not far from the house where he'd been held prisoner. He took the elevator to the top floor and waited in a plush reception room while the girl announced his arrival to Max Solar. Presently a cool young woman appeared to escort him.

"I'm Mr. Solar's secretary," she said. "Please come this way."

In Max Solar's office two men were seated at a wide desk, silhouetted against the wide windows that looked south toward Manhattan. There was no doubt which one was Solar. He was tall and white-haired, and sat behind his desk in total command, like the pilot of an aircraft or a rancher on his horse. He did not rise as Nick entered, but said simply, "So you're Velvet. About time you got here."

"I was tied up earlier."

Solar waited until his secretary left, then said, "I understand you steal things for a fee of twenty thousand dollars."

"Certain things. Nothing of value."

"I know that."

"What do you want stolen?"

"A ship's manifest, for the S.S. *Florina*. She sails tomorrow from New York harbor, so that doesn't give you much time."

"Time is no problem. What's so valuable about the manifest?"

"A mistake was made on it by an inexperienced clerk. All other copies were recovered and corrected in time, but the ship's copy got through somehow. I imagine it's locked in the purser's safe right now. I was told you could do the job. I want this corrected manifest left in its place."

"No problem," Nick said, accepting the lengthy form.

"You're very sure of yourself," the second man said. It was the first he'd spoken since Nick entered. He was small and middle-aged, with just a trace of British accent.

Solar waved a hand at him. "This is Herbert Jarvis from South Africa. He's the consignee for the *Florina* cargo. Two hundred and twelve cases of typewriters and adding machines."

"I see," Nick said. "Pleased to meet you."

"You want some money in advance? Say ten percent—two thousand?" Solar asked, opening his desk drawer.

"Fine. And don't worry about the time. I'll have the manifest before the ship sails."

"Here's my check," Jarvis said, passing it across the desk

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to Solar. "Drawn on the National Bank of Capetown. I assure you it's good. This is payment in full for the cargo."

"That's the way I like to do business," Solar told him, slipping the check into a drawer.

As Nick started to leave, Herbert Jarvis rose from his chair. "My business here is finished. If you're driving into Manhattan, Mr. Velvet, could I ride with you and save calling a taxi?"

"Sure. Come on." Downstairs he asked, "Your first trip here?"

"Oh, no. I've been here before. Quite a city you have."

"We like it." He turned the car onto the Major Deegan Expressway.

"You live in the city yourself?"

Nick shook his head. "No, near Long Island Sound."

"Are you a boating enthusiast?"

"When I have time. It relaxes me."

Jarvis lit a cigar. "We all need to relax. I'm a painter myself. I've a lovely studio with a fine north light."

"In Capetown?"

"Yes. But it's just a sideline, of course. One can hardly make a living at it." He exhaled some smoke. "I act as a middleman in buying and selling overseas. This is my first dealing with Max Solar, but he seems a decent sort."

"The *Florina* isn't bound for South Africa."

Jarvis shook his head. "The cargo will be removed in the Azores. It's safer that way."

"For the typewriters?"

"And for me."

After a time Nick said, "I'll have to drop you in midtown. Okay?"

"Certainly. I'm at the Wilson Hotel on Seventh Avenue."

"I need to purchase some supplies," Nick said. He'd just decided how he was going to steal the ship's manifest.

The *Florina* was berthed at pier 40, a massive, bustling place that jutted into the Hudson River near West Houston Street. Nick reached it in mid-afternoon and went quickly through the gates to the gangplank. The ship was showing the rust of age typical of vessels that plied the waterways in the service of the highest bidder.

The purser was much like his ship, with soiled uniform and needing a shave. He studied the credentials Nick presented and said, "This is a bit irregular."

"We believe export licenses may be lacking for some of your cargo. It's essential that I inspect your copy of the manifest."

The purser hesitated another

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moment, then said, "Very well." He walked to the safe in one corner of his office and opened it. In a moment he produced the lengthy manifest.

Nick saw at once the reason for Max Solar's concern. On the ship's copy the line about typewriters and adding machines read: *212 cases 8 mm Mauser semi-automatic rifles.* He was willing to bet that Solar Industries was not a licensed arms dealer.

"It seems in order," Nick told the purser, "but I'll need a copy of it." He opened the fat attaché case he carried and revealed a portable copying machine. "Can I plug this in?"

"Over here."

Nick inserted the manifest with a light-sensitive copying sheet into the rollers of the machine. In a moment the document reappeared. "There you are," he said, returning it to the purser. "Sorry I had to trouble you."

"No trouble." He glanced briefly at the manifest and returned it to the safe.

Nick closed the attaché case, shook the man's hand, and departed. The theft was as simple as that.

Later that night, at seven o'clock, Nick rang the doorbell of the little house where he'd been held prisoner. At first no one came to admit him, though he could see a light burning in the back bedroom. Then at last Terry appeared, her face pale and distraught.

"I've got it," Nick said. She stepped aside silently and allowed him to enter.

Sam came out of the back bedroom. "Well, Velvet! Right on time."

"Here's the manifest." Nick produced the document from the attaché case he still carried. "The only remaining original copy, showing that Solar Industries is exporting two hundred and twelve cases of semi-automatic rifles to Africa."

Sam took the document and glanced at it. For some reason the triumph didn't seem to excite him. "How did you get it?"

"A simple trick. This afternoon I purchased this portable copying machine from a friend who sometimes makes special gadgets for me. I inserted the original manifest between the rollers, but the substitute came out the other slot. It works much like those trick shop devices, where a blank piece of paper is inserted between rollers and a dollar bill comes out. The purser's copy of the manifest was rolled up and remained in the machine. The substitute copy that I'd inserted in the machine earlier came out the slot. He glanced at it briefly,

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but since only one line was different he never realized a switch had been made."

"Where did you get this substitute manifest?" Sam wanted to know.

"From Max Solar. I also got an advance for stealing the thing, which I'll return to him. I'm working for you, not Solar. And I imagine he'll pay plenty for that manifest. The clerk who typed it up must have assumed he had an export license for the guns. But without a license it would mean big trouble for Solar Industries if this manifest was inspected by port authorities."

Sam nodded glumly. "He's been selling arms illegally for years, mostly to countries in Africa and Latin America. But this was my first chance to prove it."

"I'll have my fee now," Nick said. "Thirty thousand."

"I haven't got it."

Nick simply stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I haven't got it. There is no fee. No money, no nothing." He shrugged and started to turn away.

Nick grabbed him by the collar. "If you won't pay for it, Max Solar will!"

"No, he won't," Terry said, speaking for the first time since Nick's arrival. "Look here."

Nick followed her into the back bedroom. On the rumpled bed where Nick had been held prisoner, the body of Max Solar lay sprawled and bloody. There was no doubt Solar was dead.

"How did it happen?" Nick asked. "What's he doing here?"

"I called him," Sam said. "We needed the thirty thousand to pay your fee. The only way we could get it was from Solar. So I told him we'd have the manifest here at seven o'clock. I left the front door unlocked and told him to bring $80,000. I figured $30,000 for you and the rest for us."

"What happened?"

"Terry arrived about twenty minutes ago and found him dead. It looks like he's been stabbed."

"You're trying to tell me you didn't kill him?"

"Of course not!" Sam said, a trace of indignation creeping into his voice. "Do I look like a murderer?"

"No, but then you don't look like a kidnaper either. You had the best reason in the world for wanting him dead."

"His money would have been enough revenge for me."

"Was it on him?"

"No," Terry answered. "We looked. Either he didn't bring it or the killer got it first."

"What am I supposed to do with this manifest?" Nick asked bleakly.

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"It's no good to me now. I can't get revenge on a dead man."

"That's your problem. You still owe me thirty thousand."

Sam held his hands wide in a gesture of helplessness. "We don't have the money! What should I do? Give you the mortgage on this house that's falling apart? Be thankful you got something out of Max Solar before he died."

Ignoring Nick, Terry asked, "What are we going to do with the body, Sam?"

"Do? Call the police! What else is there to do?"

"Won't they think we did it?"

"Maybe they'll be right," Nick said. "Maybe you killed him, Terry, to have the money for yourself. Or maybe Sam killed him and then sneaked out to let you find the body."

Both of them were quick to deny the accusations, and in truth Nick cared less about the circumstances of Max Solar's death than he did about the balance of his fee, and he saw no way of collecting it at the moment.

"All right," he said finally. "I'll leave you two to figure out your next move. You know where to reach me if you come up with the money. Meanwhile, I'm keeping this manifest."

He drove south, toward Manhattan, and though the night was turning chilly he left his window open. The fresh air felt good against his face and it helped him to sort out his thoughts. There was only one other person who'd have the least interest in paying money for the manifest, and that was Herbert Jarvis.

He headed for the Wilson Hotel.

Jarvis was in his room packing when Nick knocked on the door. "Well," he said, a bit startled. "Velvet, isn't it?"

"That's right. Can I come in?"

"I have to catch a plane. I'm packing."

"So I see," Nick said. He shut the door behind him.

"If you'll make it brief, I really am quite busy."

"I'll bet you are. I'll make it brief enough. I want thirty thousand dollars."

"Thirty . . . ! For what?"

"This copy of the ship's manifest for the *S.S. Florina*. The only copy that shows it's carrying a cargo of rifles."

"The business with the manifest is between you and Solar. He hired you."

"Various people hired me, but you're the only one I can collect from. Max Solar is dead."

"Dead?"

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"Stabbed to death in a house uptown. Within the past few hours."

Jarvis sat down on the bed. "That's a terrible thing."

Nick shrugged. "I assume he knew the sort of men he was dealing with."

"What's that mean?" Jarvis asked, growing nervous.

"Who do you think killed him?" Nick countered.

"That computer programmer, Sam, I suppose. That's his house uptown."

"How do you know it's Sam's house? How do you know about Sam?"

"Solar was going to meet him. He told me on the telephone."

It all fell into place for Nick. "What did he tell you?"

"That Sam wanted money for the manifest. That you were working for Sam."

"Why did he tell you about it?"

"I don't know."

"Let's take a guess. Could it have been because the check you gave him was no good? A man with Solar's world-wide contacts could have discovered quickly that there was no money in South Africa to cover your check. In fact, you're not even from South Africa, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You told me you're an artist, and since you volunteered the information I assume it's true. But you said you have a studio in Capetown with a fine north light. Artists like north light because it's truer, because the sun is never in the northern sky. But of course this is only true in the northern hemisphere. An artist in Capetown or Buenos Aires or Melbourne would want a studio with a good *south* light. Your studio, Jarvis, isn't in Capetown at all. It would have to be somewhere well north of the equator.

"And if you lied about being from South Africa, I figured the check drawn on a South African bank is probably phony too. You reasoned that once the arms shipment was safely out to sea there was no way Solar could blow the whistle without implicating himself. But when he learned your check was valueless, he phoned you and probably told you to meet him at Sam's house with the money or he'd have the cases of guns taken off the ship."

"You're saying I killed him?"

"Yes."

"You are one smart man, Velvet."

"Smart enough for a two-bit gunrunner."

Jarvis' right hand moved

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faster than Nick's eyes could follow. The knife was up his sleeve, and it missed Nick's throat by inches as it thudded into the wall. "Too bad," Nick said. "With a gun you get a second chance." And he dove for the man.

He remembered the address of Sam's house and got the phone number from a friend with the company. Sam answered on the first ring, sounding nervous, and Nick asked, "How's it going?"

"Velvet? Where are you? The police are here."

"Good," Nick said, knowing a detective would be listening in. "You did the right thing calling them. I don't know why I'm getting you off the hook, but tell them Solar's killer is in Room 334 at the Wilson Hotel on Seventh Avenue."

"You found him?"

"Yeah," Nick said. "But he didn't have any money either."

It was one of the very few times Nick Velvet failed—that is, failed to collect his full fee.

"Q"

NEXT MONTH . . .

33rd ANNIVERSARY Issue — ALL STAR!

10 *NEW* stories — including

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DISCOVERY

a "first story" by

A. A. MILNE

From AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *by A. A. Milne (Dutton, 1939): "Meanwhile my first free-lance contribution had been accepted. Sherlock Holmes had just 'returned' in* The Strand Magazine *after his duel with Moriarty. I wrote a burlesque of this, which I sent to* Punch. Punch *refused it, and I sent it to* Vanity Fair." *A. A. Milne was paid 15 shillings for his "first story"—but remember, this was in 1903.*

We are indebted to Jon L. Lellenberg of Arlington, Virginia, for this "discovery." It was he who not only found the clue in Mr. Milne's autobiography but finally tracked down the text in the October 15, 1903 issue of Vanity Fair *(London). Mr. Lellenberg, one of the most ardent of Sherlockians, with a penchant for parodies of The Master, recently published* SHYLOCK HOMES: His Posthumous Memoirs, *by John Kendrick Bangs, Edited and Introduced by Jon L. Lellenberg (The Dispatch-Box Press, Box 302, 1621 North Ode Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209, $3.50).*

Is it really so surprising that the first published fiction by A. A. Milne, famous the world over for his verses and stories about Christopher Robin and Winnie-the-Pooh, should be a parody of Sherlock Holmes? Pastiche no, parody yes . . .

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THE RAPE OF THE SHERLOCK

Being the Only True Version of Holmes's Adventures

by A. A. MILNE

It was in the summer of last June that I returned unexpectedly to our old rooms in Baker Street. I had that afternoon had the unusual experience of calling on a patient, and in my nervousness and excitement had lost my clinical thermometer down his throat. To recover my nerve I had strolled over to the old place, and was sitting in my arm-chair thinking of my ancient wound, when all at once the door opened, and Holmes glided wistfully under the table. I sprang to my feet, fell over the Persian slipper containing the tobacco, and fainted. Holmes got into his dressing-gown and brought me to.

"Holmes," I cried, "I thought you were dead."

A spasm of pain shot across his mobile brow.

"Couldn't you trust me better than that?" he asked, sadly. "I will explain. Can you spare me a moment?"

"Certainly," I answered. "I have an obliging friend who would take my practice for that time."

He looked keenly at me for answer. "My dear, dear Watson," he said, "you have lost your clinical thermometer."

"My dear Holmes—" I began, in astonishment.

He pointed to a fairly obvious bulge in his throat.

"I was your patient," he said.

"Is it going still?" I asked, anxiously.

"Going fast," he said, in a voice choked with emotion.

A twinge of agony dashed across his mobile brow. (Holmes's mobility is a byword in military Clubs.) In a little while the bulge was gone.

"But why, my dear Holmes—"

He held up his hand to stop me, and drew out an old cheque-book.

"What would you draw from that?" he asked.

"The balance," I suggested, hopefully.

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"What conclusion I meant?" he snapped.

I examined the cheque-book carefully. It was one on Lloyd's Bank, half-empty, and very, very old. I tried to think what Holmes would have deduced, but with no success. At last, determined to have a dash for my money, I said:

"The owner is a Welshman."

Holmes smiled, picked up the book, and made the following rapid diagnosis of the case:

"He is a tall man, right-handed, and a good boxer; a genius on the violin, with an unrivalled knowledge of criminal London, extraordinary powers of perception, a perfectly enormous brain; and, finally, he has been hiding for some considerable time."

"Where?" I asked, too interested to wonder how he had deduced so much from so little.

"In Portland."

He sat down, snuffed the ash of my cigar, and remarked:

"Ah! Flor—de—Dindigul—I—see,—do—you—follow—me,—Watson?" Then, as he pulled down his "Encyclopaedia Britannica" from its crate, he added:

"It is my own cheque-book."

"But Moriarty?" I gasped.

"There is no such man," he said. "It is merely the name of a soup."

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Alexander Agis' "first story"—"The Blue Room" in our December 1973 issue—really prepared the reader for the concept of crime detection that Mr. Agis now gives us in his second story. What kind of detection will we have in the future? What will be the nature of the detective's work? (We once wrote of "the detective-story writers' awareness, and in some instances, their extraordinary anticipation of the coming events that cast their shadows before.")

Well, let's find out about coming events: join the head of a future President's Commission on Crime for a tour of CASES—Crime Analysis Station, Enforcement Section—and especially of the CASES Burglary Program . . .

THE SCIENCE OF ANTICIPATION

by ALEXANDER AGIS

Commissioner Horace Wadpole Lusnet of the President's Commission on Crime was ushered into the Timing Center of the Crime Analysis Station, Enforcement Section (CASES) and let out a low whistle. Chief Detective Karrick permitted a boyish smile of satisfaction to spread across his face, revealing a row of perfectly formed white teeth, and took the Commissioner by the elbow.

"Impressive-looking, isn't it?"

"My, it certainly is," said Commissioner Lusnet. "You fellows keep track of all these figures just so you'll know when someone is *thinking* about committing a crime?"

"We certainly do, Commissioner. And we're getting so good at it that we can predict right down to the fiver when a crime is likely to occur."

"A fiver?"

Karrick permitted himself a friendly chuckle. "Oh, the terminology. Got you with that one, I suppose. A 'fiver' is just our way of saying that we can predict right to the five-minute

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time span when a crime is likely to occur. We're hoping, of course, to get it down even lower."

"My, my," the Commissioner said.

"Uh, Papolich, get the Commissioner a cup of coffee. Now if you'll step right this way, Commissioner—"

"Four sugars," the Commissioner said.

"Four sugars," said Papolich.

"No cream," the Commissioner added. "Got to watch the weight, you know." He rubbed a jeweled hand across his paunch.

Karrick led the Commissioner along a straight catwalk that overlooked a series of large wall-mounted graphs and charts. About twenty clerks in blue coats were busily walking along the wall, clipboards and pencils in hand, making notations here and there.

"How do you keep track of all this? It looks so confusing."

"Only to begin with, Commissioner. You'll see how everything is worked out to the last detail, and when we've finished with the tour I have a surprise for you. A good place for us to start is with these large charts. They are related to the incidence of crime, plotted by their seasonal, monthly, weekly, daily, and hourly variations."

Papolich brought the Commissioner's coffee. "Four sugars, no cream."

"Thank you," Commissioner Lusnet said and began to stir the coffee with the little plastic spoon. "Hate it when they don't stir it," he mumbled, "and you get down to the last mouthful and it's all sugar."

Karrick was leading him toward a door at the end of the catwalk. "Computers is the key word here. Computers that figure out all the variations for us in a fraction of the time it would take us."

"Yes, I imagine—" He took a sip from his coffee.

"For instance, take our burglary program—that's the red line on the graphs below. We have fed the computers all facts relating to burglaries committed within the continental borders. The actual number is classified, but I can tell you it is in the millions."

"Don't know why everyone drinks coffee so *hot*," the Commissioner said, sipping from his coffee. "Now, I like mine just lukewarm—don't you?"

"And consider this, Commissioner: last week we celebrated our fourteenth month of the pilot program, and already we have cut burglaries in this state by ninety-seven percent."

"Ninety-seven?"

"Yes, so you can understand why your visit is so important

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to us. If we can get the Federal Government behind us, we estimate—our computers estimate, that is—that we can cut the overall crime rate in this country by ninety-five percent in just one year."

"Well, well," the Commissioner said. "I'll certainly do my part. It was a personal favor of the President to give me this post, you know. My brother was a heavy contributor to his campaign. Frankly," he laughed, "I don't know a thing about crime. You'll have to show me."

"That we will, Commissioner," Karrick said, his white teeth flashing against the charts. "That we will. Now, if you'll just step through this door—"

Karrick held the door open, and the Commissioner, wide-eyed in his unassuming innocence, entered another room. Karrick took his handkerchief and quickly wiped his brow, then replaced the handkerchief before the Commissioner noticed. He could already feel the money pouring over his hands, through his fingers. He could envision a mass network of CASES centers all across the country, keeping track of every citizen in the United States. Karrick would show these criminals a thing or two! He would put some teeth into the law!

"Now," said the Chief Detective, fighting the pounding in his chest, "this is where we keep the summaries of the trends shown on the graphs in the other room." Commissioner Lusnet looked out over a room exactly like the first one—graphs, lines, clerks. "You'll note the red line—that's for burglaries, you remember—is a simple line plotting the highs and lows. It represents the summary of trends."

Commissioner Lusnet sipped his coffee and nodded his head; it all seemed very complicated to him.

"Now, look here, you'll note how these green lines show a sharp upturn right here?"

"Yes, yes, they certainly do."

"That means that there will be an *increase* in homicide during this time period."

"My, my."

"Now, look at these other lines—the blue and yellow ones—and you'll note that they show a downturn during this same period of time."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Commissioner Lusnet. "They certainly do!"

"That means that crimes of kidnaping and aggravated assault will show a *decrease* during this same time period."

"I see . . . I see . . ."

"And all this is due to the efficiency afforded us by the

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computer," said Karrick, "Our employees are no longer trained in the 'police sciences' as such. Most of them are now computer programers, psychology majors, efficiency experts, and research consultants. You see, Commissioner, we feel that if we can *anticipate* something, we can prevent it from happening."

"Yes, I think I've heard something like that before."

"You should have. We've got a ten-million-dollar advertising campaign to get the point across. 'If we can predict something before it occurs, we can stop it.' "

"Yes; now I know I've heard it."

Karrick stood back a half step from the Commissioner, and as the Commissioner looked out over the long row of charts and sipped his coffee, Karrick quickly took out his handkerchief and wiped his face again. Why he was sweating so, he didn't really know. He only knew they had sent this damn simpleton down to find out about his program, a simpleton who didn't know a red line from a blue one—unless it was pointed out to him that they were of different colors—and he, Chief Detective Karrick, was sweating!

"You see those clipboards the officers are carrying? Each one is a complete profile of a citizen, right down to the tiniest detail. I might add, even to how many sugars he has in his coffee."

Commissioner Lusnet raised an eyebrow. "For every citizen in this state?"

"For each and every citizen in this state—except Federal officials, of course."

"Oh," Commissioner Lusnet said, relieved, "of course."

"And just think, with the Federal Government behind us, we'll be able to include every citizen in the whole United States."

"Yes, I see."

"Now, take our CASES burglary program—it's crammed full of facts relating to burglars. How old he is, what triggers him, and what we have to do to stop him. Complete social, psychological, and economic factors—they are all in that program. It's our most advanced program, and I'm proud of it."

"I should think so."

"Then we run a computer match with the profiles and the computer gives us any names with a minimum number of match-points."

"Match-points?"

"That's just our way of saying that the computer has matched the profiles with the hypothetical profile of the typical burglar."

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"It staggers the imagination."

"Only that's where the real work begins! The officers then take over and match up the profiles with the charts. When an officer gets one that matches a minimum number of points, he takes it into the next room and talks it over with a psychologist member of our staff. At that point we start calling them 'teams.'"

"I had no idea," Commissioner Lusnet said. "The President had no idea."

"I certainly hope you'll tell him for us," Karrick said. "We need that Federal funding if we're to make this program really effective."

"I certainly will."

They had walked the entire length of the room and stopped before another door. "Are there any other questions?"

"I haven't asked any yet," the Commissioner said, surprising himself with the realization. "All this is so—so impressive that I haven't thought much about questions. But tell me, how do you actually pin all this down to an arrest? How do you get all these figures down to one particular man, one particular crime, one particular time?"

"Ah," said Karrick, "the one question I've been waiting for. And now, Commissioner, the surprise!" And he opened the third door. "Welcome to the inner sanctum of CASES!"

Commissioner Lusnet walked into a room of buzzing activity, a room with at least a thousand desks and several thousand clerks. At each desk sat two people, one in a red coat and the other in a black uniform, discussing something very earnestly. Clerks were coming and going with the clipboards. The rumble of their conversations was almost deafening.

"My God!" exclaimed Commissioner Lusnet. "What is all this costing?"

"Commissioner," said Karrick, very carefully, "this is the most important room in the whole setup. This is where the psychologist member of the team and the confrontation officer get together and talk about the arrest. This is where the final decision is made to actually make an arrest."

"You mean that at every desk in this room there is a possible arrest under consideration—at this very moment?"

"That's it exactly."

"Why, there must be thousands of them!"

"Of course not all of them will result in actual arrests. We do miss a few. But bear in mind that we have cut the overall crime rate in this state by ninety-five percent."

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Commissioner Lusnet was impressed; here, before his eyes, were possible arrests under consideration! Here was proof that the Crime Authority was working!

"Please step over here," said Karrick, taking the Commissioner's elbow and guiding him over to a desk.

"Commissioner Lusnet, this is Crime Psychoanalyst Metts and Confrontation Officer Stiltson. Gentlemen, Commissioner Horace Lusnet of the President's Commission on Crime."

"A pleasure, Commissioner."

"Glad to meet you, Commissioner."

"Thank you. I must say, I am very impressed with your operation."

"Is everything ready?" asked Karrick.

"Half an hour to O-Time, Chief."

"Good, we'll have just enough time to get there. Commissioner, we have equipped a second car to take us there. Radio hookup and all. Officer Stiltson has a radio pickup embedded in his helmet. We'll wait in the second car while he makes the arrest, and we'll be able to hear everything that's said."

"Tonight? I—we are going to witness an actual arrest?"

"That's right, Commissioner. I was told to see that you got the full story, and I'm going to see to it. Now, I suggest we get moving."

Officer Stiltson put on his helmet, got his clipboard, and checked his gun. "Ready," he said.

"I say," Commissioner Lusnet said, "is it necessary to carry the gun?"

"Just precautionary," Karrick said. "That's all."

"Oh," said Commissioner Lusnet. But he noticed Officer Stiltson had failed to buckle the strap that held the gun in its holster.

Walter Spector peered through the tattered drapes of his two-room apartment. A hint of condensation glistened on the aged bricks of the narrow street, glinting through the early fog. From somewhere atop a utility pole the droning of a transformer wavered in the air like the snoring of a huge insect.

He withdrew into the shadows of the apartment and shuffled toward the kitchen, favoring his right leg. The single bulb which he used for illumination flickered as the refrigerator started with a jerk. Walter stopped and looked at the refrigerator; he hadn't actually looked at it for some time. By all standards it should have stopped long ago, should have

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jerked and hissed and coughed into silence, should have grown warm and tepid and odorous. But it didn't know any better; all it could do was to run until it stopped. And that would be that. There were no alternatives.

But Walter Spector had had his alternatives, had stood at the crossroads that led to all his possible futures and reached out a hand and throttled all his own dreams. The refrigerator never had any choice; Walter Spector, once upon a time, had had.

He felt weak and dizzy, and a fine layer of perspiration covered his face. In the cell of the darkened apartment the undersides of his arms ached with a hard dampness.

He opened the silverware drawer and took out a large carving knife and a screwdriver with a yellow handle. Back in the front room he slipped them into the pocket of his black wool coat; then he put the coat on and turned up the collar against the fog. He put his cap on his head, low over his eyes.

As he reached for the door there was a knock on the other side.

"Mr. Spector?"

It was a tall man in a night-black uniform, an exceedingly healthy-looking young man with intelligent eyes and a firm mouth. There was a certain indefinable kindness in his manner; he might be an officer selling tickets to the policeman's ball. But there was also a hard steel glint behind his eyes, as if nothing would stop him from performing his duty.

The tall man removed his helmet, cradled it in his elbow, and held his clipboard in the same hand. Walter's eyebrows came together for an instant, and he looked down at his hands.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Walter Spector, Social Security Number 247-AZ-5114?"

"I suppose so."

"Born October 12, 1929, Rocky Mount, North Carolina?"

"Yes," Walter answered, "but I don't see what—"

"Mr. Spector, my name is Stiltson—Confrontation Officer Stiltson of the Crime Analysis Station, Enforcement Section, State of California Crime Prevention Authority."

"How do you do," said Walter.

"Mr. Spector, the Crime Prevention Authority was enacted into law to prevent crimes before they occur. Our motto is, 'If we can predict something before it occurs, we can stop it.'"

"Of course," said Walter.

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"The CASES burglary program contains the facts on millions of burglaries. It can tell us what makes a burglar, what motivates a burglar, what triggers a burglar. It can tell us about his methods and opportunities. It can tell us a myriad of other details. CASES has, in short, given us a complete portrait of the burglar, including all pertinent social, psychological and economic factors."

"Of course," said Walter.

"We also maintain statistics on facts relating to timing, including seasonal, monthly, weekly, daily, and hourly variations. According to our program, Mr. Spector, you are scheduled to commit a burglary tonight between"—he glanced down at the clipboard—"1:05 A.M. and 1:15 A.M."

Walter didn't say anything.

"Were you going out?"

"Out?"

"Your coat and hat."

"I . . . yes, I was going out. For a walk."

"What do you have in your coat pocket?"

"For a walk, yes. You see, I often take—"

"In your coat pocket, Mr. Spector. What do you have?"

"I . . . in my pocket?"

"Isn't that a kitchen knife protruding from your coat pocket?"

Walter looked down at the knife protruding from his pocket. "Yes," he said, "and a screwdriver too."

"Mr. Spector, you must understand that my job is to prevent crimes before they occur. To save the possible loss of life and property. At this time no crime has actually been committed. You have been saved from making a serious mistake."

"Of course," Walter looked up, "I haven't *done* anything yet!"

"Our records indicate that you are out of food, that your utility bills are overdue, that you are about to be evicted from your apartment."

"Evicted?"

"That you were laid off from the Polaris Car Wash because of an accident attributed to your carelessness."

"The suds, all over the place. My leg—it was just an accident. I'm going back soon."

"That you have no savings, no income, no benefits that you can draw on."

"Yes, my leg—it isn't healing right. But I'll be back in—"

"Mr. Spector, if you will come with me, please." The officer put the helmet on his head and stepped back a couple of steps.

"I—well, I don't know. What do you want with me? I haven't *done* anything."

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"Mr. Spector, it is my duty to escort you to the Prevention House."

"Prevention House?" said Walter. "Oh, no! I couldn't —you see, in just a matter of— oh, no, I couldn't go!"

"Mr. Spector?"

Walter took a deep breath, and when he exhaled he found himself looking down. "But I haven't done anything."

"I'm sure the Authority will take that into consideration."

The refrigerator started again, and Walter looked back into the apartment. "If we were to wait just a few minutes. The time would be past and—"

"I understand that, Mr. Spector, but I have no authorization in that respect. If the Probation-Incarceration Computer decides that you'll be a good risk, you may come back. On the other hand, if the computer decides that you may contemplate another crime, you'll have to remain at the Prevention House until such time as the computer decides that you are again a good risk."

Walter looked back into the apartment again. The cupboard door stood ajar and the silverware drawer hung open. The refrigerator continued its odd joggling sound. He caught sight of an old calendar on the kitchen wall. It was brown and many years out of date, and where it curled away from the wall it left a small space infested with roach eggs. He didn't even know what year it represented.

"Should I turn off the light?"

"That won't be necessary. I have already notified the proper authorities."

Walter stepped out onto the porch and into the wisps of fog, Officer Stiltson behind him. He looked around one last time at the neighborhood he knew so well. There was the Pay-Less Corner Grocery, diagonally across the street. He had passed it every night on his return walk to the apartment. And he had worked out his plan on one of those walks. He had worked it out so well; only a few minutes ago he had decided finally to go through with it.

There was the officer's arrest car, its door flung open, a small cloud of vapor emanating from the exhaust and blending into the fog. And there was a small bright light from the radio inside. Just waiting. Waiting to take him to the Prevention House where he would be locked up and watched and given tests—countless tests with countless questions that he couldn't hope to answer. No more walks through his old neigborhood. No more choice of whether he wanted to walk

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or not. Walter Spector: criminal, prisoner.

Walter took a deep breath—and sprinted off the porch and dashed diagonally across the yard. Officer Stiltson calmly and carefully fired three shots at his back, the shots hitting Walter in the left lung, the right lung, and the right kidney; and Walter fell dead.

In the second car across the street Commissioner Lusnet and Chief Detective Karrick watched as Officer Stiltson reloaded his gun.

"Overreaction," said Karrick, his fingers dug into the armrest. "One shot would have stopped him."

"My goodness," said Commissioner Lusnet.

"Q"

NEXT MONTH...

33rd ANNIVERSARY Issue—ALL STAR!

10 *NEW* stories—including

MICHAEL GILBERT *(about Inspector Petrella)*

HUGH PENTECOST *(about Pierre Chambrun)*

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AGATHA CHRISTIE *(about Hercule Poirot)*

ANTON CHEKHOV *(about vengeance)*

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It was the annual meeting of the Brierwood Men's Club. . .

A NIGHT OUT WITH THE BOYS

by ELSIN ANN GARDNER

The lights were dim, so low I could hardly make out who was in the room with me. Annoyed, I picked my way to the center where the chairs were. The smoky air was as thick as my wife's perfume, and about as breathable.

I pulled a metal folding chair out and sat next to a man I didn't know. Squinting, I looked at every face in the room. Not one was familiar. Damn that Russell! I didn't belong in the gathering, and he had to have known it.

Adjusting my tie, the wide garish tie Georgia had given me for Christmas, I stared at the glass ashtray in the hand of the man next to me. The low-wattage lights were reflected in it, making, I thought, a rather interesting pattern. At least, it was more interesting than anything that had happened yet that evening.

I was a fool to have come, I thought, angry. When the letter came the week before, my wife had opened it. As always.

"Look," she'd said, handing me my opened mail. It was a small rectangle of neatly printed white paper.

"It's from that nice man down the block. It's an invitation to a meeting of some sort. You'll have to go."

"Go? Meeting?" I asked, taking off my overcoat and reaching for the letter.

You are invited, the paper read, *to the Annual Meeting of the Brierwood Men's Club, to be held at the Ram's Room at Twink's Restaurant on Monday Evening, January 8, at eight o'clock.*

It was signed, *Yours in brotherhood, Glenn Russell.*

"Oh, I don't know," I said, "I hardly know the guy. And I've never heard of the club."

"You're going," Georgia rasped. "It's your chance to get in good with the new neighbors. We've lived here two whole months and not a soul has dropped in to see us."

No wonder, I thought. They've heard enough of your

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whining and complaining the times they've run into you at the supermarket.

"Maybe," I said aloud, "people here are just reserved."

"Maybe people in the east just aren't as *friendly* as the people you knew back home," she said, sneering.

"Oh, Georgia, don't start that up again! We left, didn't we? I pulled up a lifetime of roots for you, didn't I?"

"Are you trying to tell me it was my fault? Because if you *are*, Mr. Forty-and-Foolish, you've got another think coming! It was entirely your fault, and you're just lucky I didn't leave you over it."

"All right, Georgia."

"Where would you be without Daddy's money, Mr. Fathead? Where would you be without me?"

"I'm sorry, Georgia. I'm just tired, that's all."

She gave a smug little smile and continued. "You *are* going," she nodded, making her dyed orange hair shake like an old mop. "Yes, indeed. You can wear your good dark brown suit and that new tie I gave you and—"

And she went on and on, planning my wardrobe, just as she'd planned every minute of my last fourteen years.

So the night of January eighth I was at the Annual Meeting of the Brierwood Men's Club. What crazy kind of club had a meeting *annually?* A service club? Fraternal organization?

It was almost eight when the men stopped filing into the room. They were, with hardly an exception, a sad-looking lot. I mean, they looked *depressed.* A gathering of funeral directors? A club for people who had failed at suicide and were contemplating it again?

"I think this is all of us, men," Russell said, standing on the dais. "Yes. We can begin. Alphabetical order, as always. One minute each, no more."

Alphabetical order? One minute?

A sad tired-looking man in his fifties stood up and went to the platform.

"Harry Adams. She, she—"

He wiped his brow nervously, then went on.

"This year has been the worst ever for me. You've seen her. She's so beautiful. I know you think I'm lucky. But I'm not, oh, no. She's been after me every minute to buy her this, buy her that, so she can impress all the neighbors. I don't make enough money to be able to do this! But she threatened to leave me and take all I've got, which isn't that much any longer, if I don't give in.

"So I took out a loan at the

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bank, told them it was for a new roof, bought her everything she wanted with the money. But it wasn't enough. She wants more. A full-length mink coat, a two-carat diamond ring. I'll have to go to another bank and get another loan for my roof. I'm running out of money, I'm running out of roofs—"

"One minute, Harry."

Dejected, the little man left the platform and another man took his place.

"Joe Browning. She invited her mother to live with us. The old dame moved in last April. I can hardly stand my wife, but now I've got two of them. Whining, nagging, in stereo, yet. You can't imagine how it is, guys! You think you've got troubles? You should have the troubles I've got. I get home from work five minutes late, I've got two of them on my back. I forget my wife's birthday, my mother-in-law lets me have it. I forget my mother-in-law's birthday, my wife lets me have it."

He looked over at Russell, sitting on the platform.

"More?"

"Ten seconds, Joe."

"I just want to say I can't stand it at home any longer! I'm not a young man any longer. I—"

"Minute, Joe."

And then it was another's turn. I sat there rigid with fascination. What a great idea! Once a year to get together and complain about the wife! Get it out of the system, let it all out. And to think I hadn't wanted to come!

Some guy named Dorsey spoke next. His wife had eaten herself up to 280 pounds. And Flynn, his wife had gone to thirty doctors for her imagined ills. Herter, his wife refused to wear her false teeth around the house unless they had guests, and Hurd, his wife wouldn't let him go out with the boys, and Klutz, his wife had wrecked his brand-new sports car three times during the year, and Lemming, his wife gave all his comfortable old clothes to charity, and Morgan, his wife kept going through the house, finding his liquor bottles and pouring them down the sink.

And then it was my turn.

And the whole time I was listening to these men I was thinking, they think they have it bad? Really? Because none of them had a wife as rotten as mine. Oh, I guess we all think now and then that we've picked a lemon off the tree of love, to get poetic for a moment, but compared to those men with their crummy complaints I really did have the all-time booby prize.

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I'd figured when Morgan got up to speak it would be my turn next, so I rehearsed what to say. It wasn't, you understand, that I wanted to impress anybody. But to be actually able to say it out loud, to tell the world what she'd done to me — pure heaven!

I took my place on the dais and looked at Russell.

"You can begin now," he said kindly.

"Fred Norton. Her name was Annie and she was my secretary and she was twenty-three years old and I loved her more than anyone else on earth and I knew I always would and my wife who is cold like you wouldn't believe found out and told everyone on the west coast what I'd done and said we'd have to move a thousand miles away from 'that tramp,' only Annie wasn't a tramp and I'll never in my life see her again and I still love her so much and my wife keeps bringing the whole thing up and I try to forget her because it hurts so much, but I know I'll never be able to, especially with my wife reminding me all the time."

"One minute, Fred."

"I can't stand my wife!" I yelled into the microphone as I left the platform.

Never in my thirty-nine and three-quarter years had I felt so good. Almost laughing from the deep pleasure of getting it all out of my system, I took my seat and half listened to the others. Owens, with his wife who told his kids he was a dummy, and Quenton, whose wife had gone back to college and now thought she was smarter than he was, and Smith, whose wife slept until noon and made him do the housework, all the way down to Zugay, whose wife made all his clothes so that he went out looking like a holdover from the Big Depression. Which he certainly did.

One guy, who hadn't spoken, interested me. He was smiling. Actually sitting there with a big grin on his face. I was staring at him, wondering if his face was familiar, when Russell spoke.

"All right, men. Time to vote. George, hand out the paper and pencils, okay?"

Vote?

"Vote?" I asked the man sitting next to me, whose wife hid his toupee when she didn't want him to go out.

"Sure. Vote for the one who has the lousiest wife."

I scribbled down the name Fred Norton. After all, I did have the lousiest wife.

Glenn Russell collected the slips of paper and sorted them. In a few minutes he turned to face the men.

"For the first time, men," he

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said, "a new member has won. Fred Norton. The one with the wife, you remember, who called his nice girl friend a tramp."

Then he smiled. "Congratulations, Fred!"

I half rose, feeling somewhat foolish and yet proud. It was indeed an honor.

And then all of them, all the sad-faced, beaten-down men, gathered around me and shook my hand. Some of them actually had tears in their eyes as they patted me on the back.

Later, as we all went to the lounge to have a drink before going home, I found Glenn Russell at the end of the bar and went over to him with my drink.

"This is some deal," I said. "It really, really felt good to get it out of my system. Whose idea was this club?"

"Mine," he said. "We've met once a year for the last six years. I control the membership and I wanted you to be included this year. That wife of yours is really something, isn't she?"

"Yes," I agreed. "She sure is. How come you didn't speak? Because it's your club?"

"Oh. No, my wife passed away a few years ago."

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling suddenly awkward. "That guy sitting over there, the one who's had the big smile on his face all evening, who the heck is he?"

"Gary McClellan? He's the vet in our fair city."

"Oh, sure, now I remember. Say, didn't my wife tell me that McClellan's wife died last year in some sort of horrible accident?"

Russell smiled broadly and patted me on the arm.

"Of course, old man! McClellan was *last* year's winner!"

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

We tend to think of the deductive detective as a "thinking machine"—cold, calculating, detached. But suppose such a detective—especially an amateur who investigates crime not for money but for the love of the game—suppose such a simon-pure detective finds himself in grave trouble with the law? Will he remain the objective, logical, emotionless prober and pursuer of the truth?

Read how Mr. Strang, the little old science teacher at Aldershot High School, faced this unexpected predicament . . .

MR. STRANG UNDER ARREST

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

Mr. Strang wriggled about on the hard wooden chair, trying to find a comfortable position. He counted the acoustic tiles that made up the walls and ceiling of the small room, and then calculated in his head the total number used. With a loud sigh he began drumming his fingers on the hard surface of the table at which he sat. If only the room had a window he could at least watch the rain which he could hear guttering through the downspouts outside the building. But there was no window.

"Coelenterata," he growled in annoyance.

It was a Saturday morning, following a week of unrelenting rain in Aldershot. Mr. Strang's high-school students, unable to work off their high spirits outside, had generated a full head of steam and conducted themselves in a manner that might have been suitable to the hordes of Attila the Hun, but which was downright disgraceful in teen-agers preparing for mid-term examinations. The advent of the weekend found the old teacher exhausted in mind and body, with his aging joints aching from the damp weather. He had looked forward to sleeping late this morning.

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But here it was, only a little after nine, and he found himself in an Interrogation Room of the Third Precinct Police Station.

The detective who had called on him at Mrs. Mackey's rooming-house, a granite block of a man named Walter Fosse, had been unfailingly polite. He'd been sorry to disturb Mr. Strang, but he was conducting an investigation, and he wondered if the teacher would mind coming down to the station-house to make a statement concerning his whereabouts between eight and ten the previous evening. Oh, yes, there was one other thing. Would he mind driving his own car to the station? He could leave it in the police garage out of the rain.

His mind still foggy with sleep, Mr. Strang had taken his car to the station where he'd dictated and then signed a statement to the effect that up until a little before nine the night before, he'd been in the Aldershot Public Library. Then he'd driven home and spent the rest of the evening lying in bed and reading one of the books he'd checked out. Fosse had taken the statement when he'd left the Interrogation Room, his parting words being that he'd be "back in a few minutes."

The whole procedure had been so foreign to Mr. Strang that not once had he thought to ask what the police were investigating.

"Back in a few minutes indeed," the teacher muttered waspishly. "It must be at least an hour he's left me here alone." He glanced at his watch. Ten minutes had gone by since Fosse's departure.

He rubbed his hands against his wrinkled jacket to dry the sweat that had suddenly begun to pour from his palms. It wasn't that he was afraid exactly, but the situation was peculiar, to say the least. In the classroom he was fully in charge, but a police station was unfamiliar territory. Fosse had his statement, so why couldn't Strang leave? He was being treated almost as if he were a criminal. Again he dried his hands on his jacket.

The door of the Interrogation Room swung open and Fosse entered, jerking his thumb toward the hallway outside. "C'mon," he said to Strang tersely.

The detective led the little old science teacher along a dirty hallway that had been painted a *mal-de-mer* green around the turn of the century and into another, larger room. Inside the room was a long table with three men seated along one side. The little ferret-faced one with the gray Vandyke beard

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was John Kitrich, the manager of Aldershot Home Furnishings, and the redhead with the squinty eyes was Dan MacIver, who worked in the office of the village sanitation department. The third, a lanky blond youth with several days' growth of stubble on his chin, was unknown to the teacher.

On the opposite side of the table was a huge man with curly black hair and a full bristling beard which swept in ebony waves about his head and face, giving him the appearance of a satanic Santa Claus. And then, looking around the man's massive body, Mr. Strang caught sight of Detective Paul Roberts.

"Paul!" Mr. Strang felt distinctly relieved. Here at last was a friend, someone who could explain what was going on. "I've never been so glad to see anyone in my life."

"Sit down, Mr. Strang," said Roberts with a smile, motioning to a chair next to Kitrich. "Now that we're all here, I'd like to remind everybody that this is Detective Fosse's case."

"Case? What case?" Kitrich was on his feet, waving a finger at Roberts. "I was called down here to make a statement about where I was yesterday evening. Now that I've made it I want to go home." There were murmurs of agreement from MacIver and the other man.

Fosse strode to the head of the table and rapped his knuckles against its surface. Immediately the room became ominously quiet. Quickly the detective made the necessary introductions. Mr. Strang learned that the blond young man was Willard Quinn, a bakery truck driver and sometime college student. The bearded colossus next to Roberts was Victor Wilson, who'd been on duty checking out books at the library the previous evening.

"I'd like to start," said Fosse, peering out from between twin thickets of eyebrows, "by apologizing to three of you four men. You're here needlessly. The trouble is, I don't know which three."

He leaned forward, resting his weight on slabs of hands. "Right now," he continued, "there's a man named Clifford Berlinger lying in the hospital with a broken jaw, possible skull fracture, three cracked ribs, multiple bruises and contusions—you name it."

"Cliff?" said Mr. Strang involuntarily. "But I saw him just last night at the—"

Fosse nodded. "The library. I thought you'd know him, Mr. Strang."

"Of course I know him. He's taught American history at the high school for almost as many years as I've been there."

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"Do you happen to know what he was doing at the library?"

"Oh." The teacher thought for a moment. "Cliff spends a lot of his spare time writing articles for obscure little history magazines. The one he's researching now is—let me see—'Southern Colonial Coastal Shipping, 1670 to 1720.' I remember kidding him that he'd probably have a readership of about six."

"So that's why we're here," said MacIver. "We were all at the library last evening."

As Fosse nodded, Quinn shifted in his chair and ran a hand across his unshaved chin. "Man, this is really somethin' else, you know?" he said, shaking his head. "Sure I was in the library. There was at least fifteen people there, so why pick on us four? Or maybe we're the only ones who look like we get our kicks out of beating up old men."

"Berlinger wasn't beaten up." Fosse was visibly restraining himself from launching an attack on Quinn. "It was a hit-and-run. Right in the library driveway. Berlinger must have been standing there when the car struck him. He was thrown against the side of the building."

There was a low buzz of voices as the four men absorbed this information. "Mister Fosse." Dan MacIver's voice had the trace of a Scotsman's burr. "I don't go along with the young man's probable opinion of the police, but his question was a good one. So would you mind telling us why of all the people in the library you selected the four of us as suspects?"

"Nothing's been said about suspects, Mr. MacIver. We've just asked for statements from you, that's all."

"D'ye take me for a loony, sir? You didn't draw our names out of hats. Come now. Why *us*?"

Suddenly Mr. Strang shot to his feet. "Paul," he said, his eyes blazing at the detective seated across from him, "I don't like the way this thing is being handled!"

Fosse started to interrupt, but Roberts waved him to silence. "What do you mean, Mr. Strang?" he asked.

The teacher removed his glasses and placed them in a jacket pocket. "I feel as if I were doing a science experiment with only half the necessary chemicals. First, out of all the people in the library you choose the four of us to come down and make statements without a word about what they were for. All right, we've made them. Now you bring us all here together. Why? We're

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being spoon-fed information a little at a time, Paul, and I don't like it. Either tell us what information you have—all of it—or I, for one, am going home."

As he stood looking down at the two detectives, they both began to feel a little like schoolboys who'd just received a scolding.

Fosse's face became fiery red. "I don't have to—"

"Come on, Walt," said Roberts. "He's got a point, admit it. Open up. What's the harm?"

"And while you're at it," added the teacher, "you might tell us what he's doing here." He pointed a gaunt finger at Victor Wilson. "He's obviously not a suspect. Wrong side of the table."

Fosse's eyes locked with those of Roberts, and it was Fosse who glanced down first. "Okay," he said finally. "We'd like to wrap this case up quick. We—that is, I—thought we'd get you in here and pick your brains to see if we could come up with something that would throw a little light on what really happened last night. If you have any objections to our handling things this way, you're free to walk out. Officially we wouldn't question the motive of anyone who did. Unofficially—" He shrugged bulky shoulders. "We'd be forced to draw some unpleasant conclusions."

"I for one wish to contact my lawyer before saying another word," said Kitrich.

"That's your privilege," said Roberts. "But remember, Mr. Kitrich, nobody's accused you of anything." A puckish smile came across his face. "Yet," he added.

"As for me," said MacIver, "I'm not guilty of anything, and I'd like to say so out loud. But if you don't mind, Mr. Strang here has a brain that seems a bit more organized than mine. I'll let him do the talking for me."

"Right on, man," said Quinn. He turned to Mr. Strang, holding a clenched fist high. "Go to it, teach. Put the screws to the screws!"

"Okay," said Fosse quickly. "What do you want to know, Mr. Strang?"

"Everything," was the reply. "A friend of mine has been badly injured. That's shock enough for one day. But on top of that I find myself as one of four suspected of the crime. And I don't mind telling you the situation has me scared stiff. So could you stop being mysterious and tell us in detail just exactly what we're suspected of?"

"Let's take it from the top," said Fosse. He turned toward Victor Wilson. "You want to start?"

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Ponderously Wilson got to his feet. "I'm new to the village. I moved into my sister's house over on Elm Court last Thursday. Maybe one of you know her. Mrs. Zoller?"

MacIver nodded. "The widow lady. Spends every Saturday afternoon washing her new sedan. I see her—I live in the same neighborhood."

"At any rate," Wilson went on, "yesterday was my first day on my job as librarian. I closed the place promptly at nine and went out to my car and started the engine. As I drove down the driveway I thought I spotted something white next to the building. I came very near not stopping. What I mean is, it was only a few minutes' drive to home, but I was tired and wet and all. Oh, dear, I am making a mess of this, aren't I?" He looked in confusion at Fosse.

"Quite all right," rumbled the detective. "Just tell the story in your own way, Mr. Wilson."

"Well, since the library was in my care I thought I'd better investigate. That's when I found Mr. Berlinger, lying on the ground next to the driveway. It was his cloth raincoat I'd seen. I tried to get back into the library to call someone, but I'd already set the spring locks and I don't as yet have a key to them. Heavens, the trouble I had finding a telephone at that hour of the night. I finally located an all-night drug store and called from there. I—I guess that's all, Mr. Fosse."

"Wilson's call came in at nine thirty," said Fosse. "I called for an ambulance and a patrol car. Then Roberts and me drove to the library. Mr. Wilson had waited for us, but we didn't keep him long on account of his old sports car had a rip in the canvas top, and water was pouring in on him. We checked Berlinger while the attendants were putting him in the ambulance, but if there was any paint or other evidence on his clothes it had been washed away by the rain. But with the patrol-car spotlight we got a good look at where Berlinger had been lying."

Fosse fished into a pocket and brought out a small envelope which he proceeded to open. "We found something near the body," he said. "Personally I don't think it means a thing, but you might think different." He shook out the contents—two small bits of ridged glass.

"These came from an automobile sealed-beam headlight," he said. "At first we figured we'd find out who among the people in the library that evening had a busted headlight on the front of his car."

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"And who did?" asked Mr. Strang.

Fosse let out a deep sigh. "We have been working on this thing since ten o'clock last night," he said. "We checked the people who were in the library six ways from Sunday. The cards from the books that were taken out helped there. Finally we got a complete list. Then we went back and looked at their cars. Fortunately most people leave them outside. We only had to wake up a couple of 'em to get into their garages."

Fosse pounded his fist against the table. "Not one of the cars we saw had a busted headlight," he said. "Furthermore none of 'em had a light replaced recently. So it's my guess the glass had been lying there quite a while and has nothing to do with this case. But we do figure the car last night hit Berlinger hard enough to make a dent."

"So that's why I'm here." Mr. Strang could feel the sense of relief flooding through him. "Simply because my old car has dents in its fenders."

"The right front fender, to be exact," said Fosse.

"My jalopy gets creased by a taxi and right away I'm a criminal," sneered Quinn. "Big deal."

"I told my boy to be careful when he used the car last week," MacIver chimed in. "Wait until he hears the trouble he got me in."

"All right," Fosse interrupted. "Now you know. The mechanics and lab technicians down in the garage have been examining your cars while we talked with you. I doubt they found anything, or I'd have heard about it by now. So the only thing left to say is that if one of you is guilty, you'd be doing yourself a favor by telling us now. We might be able to do something about lessening the charge. Maybe the guilty one would get off with only a stiff fine. But if we have to dig up the evidence we'll see the guilty party gets the book thrown at him."

The four men looked warily at one another. Mr. Strang could feel the sweat coursing down his back.

A uniformed officer escorted the four men to the door of the precinct house. As they left the building and stepped into the rain, Kitrich turned to MacIver. "He had no reason to bring us down here," said Kitrich, his small beard quivering in outrage.

"Look, I agree a dented fender doesn't make one of us guilty," said MacIver. "But they've got to start somewhere."

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"But we have our rights. As citizens."

"Hey, man," giggled Quinn as they headed for the police garage. "Do you suppose them fuzz will ever find out who really did it?"

"I assume the police have their own ways of answering that," replied the teacher coldly.

The following Wednesday Mr. Strang found out what that answer was.

All the students and teachers in Aldershot High School were buzzing with rumors about Mr. Berlinger's accident and the fact that Mr. Strang was under suspicion of hit-and-run. At the end of the day, after having been asked for the sixth time by his principal, Marvin W. Guthrey, whether he had anything he'd like to get off his chest, Mr. Strang left the building.

Fosse was standing by the teacher's car, waiting for him.

"Good afternoon," said Mr. Strang with a polite nod. "Something I can do for you?"

"Mr. Strang, I'm placing you under arrest on the charge of leaving the scene of an accident. You have the right to remain silent, but if you do choose to—"

As Fosse proceeded with the litany of an arrested man's rights Mr. Strang could do nothing but shake his head in disbelief. His stomach churned, and for a moment he thought he might be sick. There was an unreal element about it, as if he were standing apart watching the arrest of a complete stranger. It was an awful dream, and in a moment he'd wake up. Fosse's final words did awaken him.

"Look, I don't want to have to use the handcuffs. It would have a bad effect on the kids. So just get in the car quietly, huh?"

On limp legs Mr. Strang allowed himself to be led to Fosse's car.

Fifteen minutes later Mr. Strang was in the same Interrogation Room he had occupied the previous Saturday. He was seated at the table while Fosse and Paul Roberts spoke heatedly in one corner.

"Dammit!" snapped Roberts, "I told you to take it easy on him. He's an old man. Did you have to come on so strong?"

"I tell you, I didn't—"

"It's all right, Paul," said Mr. Strang weakly. "If I could just have a glass of water."

Fosse went for the water as Roberts sat down beside the teacher. "Just take it easy, Leonard," said the detective kindly. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

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"Paul, I swear there's nothing to tell. Believe me, I don't even know why I'm here."

"Fosse got to speak to Berlinger in the hospital this morning. Oh, hell, I know you're innocent, but—"

He was interrupted by Fosse returning to the room. In one hand was a glass of water. The other held a small portable tape recorder.

"I guess Roberts told you where I was this morning," said Fosse. "Berlinger's jaw is all wired up, so it's hard for him to talk, but I'm sure you'll be interested in what he had to say."

"I've known Mr. Strang a long time," snapped Roberts, "and I won't have him badgered, Fosse. Just play the tape."

Fosse pressed a button and the recorder reels began to turn.

"—only a very short visit," came a deep voice from the machine.

And then Fosse's voice: "Fine, Doctor. That's all I'll need."

The reels spun on in silence. Then Fosse was heard again. "Mr. Berlinger? Are you awake?"

Two soft groans might have been an affirmative reply.

"Do you know who it was, Mr. Berlinger? The man who hit you with his car at the library?"

"Yes." It was little more than a whisper.

"Who, Mr. Berlinger? Who was it?"

The reels made two revolutions. Then the weak voice whispered through wired jaws: "Teach . . ."

A shiver ran up Mr. Strang's spine as the voice trailed off into nothingness.

Fosse reached over and flipped the switch. "Okay," he said. "Paul tells me you're very sharp, Mr. Strang. We got four suspects. A store manager, a man who works in the sanitation department, a truck driver"—he paused for effect—"and a teacher. Now you heard the tape. Who do you think Berlinger was accusing?"

Mr. Strang just shook his head and stared at the table.

"Mr. Strang." Fosse spoke in a low confidential voice. "Like Paul says, you're an old man. Now we can work something out. I'm sure no judge is going to give a person like you more than a few months. Why don't you just tell us how it all happened?"

A few months in prison. And what then? Leave Aldershot—the only home he'd known for most of his life? How could he be expected to command honor and respect from his students after this? He'd be washed up as a teacher wherever he went. It

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all seemed so unfair. Mr. Strang was innocent.

But then why that accusing word on the tape?

"What now, Paul?" Mr. Strang asked in a cracked voice.

"We'll let you phone a lawyer. If you hurry, maybe he can arrange bail before the court closes."

As they left the room Fosse started to grip Mr. Strang's arm, but Roberts brushed the other detective's hand away. They went out into the hallway, where a plumber was trying to unplug the drain to one of the building's ancient drinking fountains.

Mr. Strang looked at the can of caustic soda in the plumber's hand. The word POISON was printed in big red letters along the side of the can.

Something stirred in the teacher's mind. Trancelike he walked over and took the can from the plumber's hand.

"Hey," muttered Fosse to Roberts. "You don't think he'd try to swallow—"

But the teacher was making no attempt to open the can. Instead he peered closely at the label.

"Paul," said Mr. Strang, returning to his place, "could I ask Mr. Fosse just one question?"

Roberts looked at Fosse. They shrugged. "Why not?"

"Tell me, Mr. Fosse, when you visited Cliff—Mr. Berlinger—did he act at all strange?"

"He didn't act any way. In the first place the doctors had given him something for the pain, so he was groggy. And second, he couldn't hardly move anything but his eyes. And he wasn't even looking at me. Just staring through the door of the room."

" 'Through' the door? It was open then?"

"Sure. There was a big poster outside on the opposite wall. It said, *Speed Kills.*"

"Is that all that was on it?"

"Yep. Underneath the printing there was this big skull and crossbones. And a hypodermic needle at the bottom."

Mr. Strang could almost hear the wheels whirring in his brain as he tried to remember something he'd heard in a high-school class nearly 50 years ago. And then the wheels stopped.

Jackpot!

"Geez, look at him, Paul," whispered Fosse. "This is really beginning to hit him. He's crying."

Mr. Strang whipped out a red bandanna handkerchief and blew his nose loudly. Waves of relief washed over him, and he longed to set his trembling body into a chair. No, this was not a time for weakness.

Slowly he drew his glasses

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from the jacket pocket and peered through them at the detectives as he might have regarded a class of students. "Here's what I want you to do," he said imperiously.

"What *you* want?" Fosse's face was starched with surprise. "Hey, you're in custody, mister!"

"Shut up and listen, Walt. You might learn something." There was a grin plastered across Roberts' face. If Mr. Strang was acting like a teacher again, the truth was coming.

"Mr. Fosse." The teacher stood poised on a pinnacle of icy dignity. "If you want the person who really ran down Cliff Berlinger, I'll tell you what to do. Listen closely because I'm not about to repeat myself."

For a moment Fosse was back in St. William's Parochial School, preparing to have his knuckles rapped by Sister Anne's ruler. He listened without interruption.

When the teacher had finished, Fosse shook his head. "I dunno, Mr. Strang," he said. "It sounds like a mighty long shot to me."

"What have you got to lose by taking a look?" asked Roberts. "And just to make it interesting, I'll bet you a steak dinner that Mr. Strang's right, that you find it."

In less than 45 minutes Fosse returned to the precinct house with a new prisoner in tow. "It's like you had second sight, Mr. Strang," Fosse said in awed tones. "It was all there. The car and everything. He'd put in a new headlight, but I found the old one in the trash. It's down at the lab right now, and if the piece of glass we found on the library driveway fits the rest, we've got our man. It's spooky how you knew all about it."

"Hello, Mr. Wilson," said the teacher. "I can't tell you how good it is to see you here."

The librarian mumbled something into his black beard and stared at the floor.

"Go on, Mr. Strang," said Fosse. "Lay out the case against him."

"You haven't got a thing on me," growled Wilson. "Both Roberts and Fosse saw my car at the library that night, and there wasn't a dent or a broken headlight on it."

"Of course there wasn't," replied the teacher. "Because the car they saw was not the car you were in when you hit Cliff Berlinger."

"You're crazy."

"Come now, Mr. Wilson. The time for dissembling is past. Your car—the one you were in when Mr. Fosse saw you—has a leaky canvas top. Therefore you

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must have borrowed your sister's sedan so you wouldn't leave the library to find your own car half full of water. But after the borrowed car hit Cliff Berlinger—and before you phoned the police—you drove the damaged automobile back to your sister's house and stashed it in the garage. The trip couldn't have taken more than ten minutes.

"You then drove back to the library in your own car, stopping off at a drug store long enough to phone the police and still return before anyone else got to the library. That's why your call was made at nine thirty even though the library closed at nine. And the police never examined your garage for the car they were looking for because at no time were you under suspicion. On the contrary, you were the public-spirited citizen who had reported the crime."

Paul Roberts' grin threatened to touch his earlobes. It was good to see the old Mr. Strang back, instead of the pitiful creature the teacher had become during the time he was under arrest.

"I deny the whole thing," Wilson snapped.

"Mr. Wilson," chided the teacher. "How do you explain that broken headlight from your sister's car?"

"Anybody can break a headlight."

"You'll be singing a different tune if the lab matches the bits of glass I found with the headlight from your rubbish can," said Fosse. "And even if they don't, Berlinger's getting better every day. He'll make a positive identification of you, all right."

Fosse turned to the teacher. "Just one thing I don't get. How did you know it was Wilson, Mr. Strang?"

"Cliff Berlinger told me."

"But all he said was 'teach'."

Mr. Strang leaned down and picked up a book from the floor. "While you were at Wilson's sister's house, Paul and I got this from the library," he said.

"What's it about?"

"One thing at a time. It's pretty obvious from the recording that all Cliff could manage to mumble was a word of one syllable. But he knew me well, and my name's easy to say. So why didn't he simply say 'Strang'?"

"Look, the doc had given him some kind of drug or something."

"Yes, he was certainly in a dazed condition. But he was a historian, remember that. And he had been researching a paper on shipping off the Atlantic and Gulf coasts in the early seventeen hundreds until a few min-

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utes before the car struck him. Add that to his staring at the skull and crossbones on the poster. Don't all those things suggest something to you?"

"Let me see. Poison, maybe, like on the can the plumber had." Fosse scratched his head, still puzzled. "Or—" His eyes widened. "Pirates?"

"Go to the head of the class, Mr. Fosse. Pirates. The time about which Cliff planned to write was the era of some of the famous buccaneers who plied the southern coastal waters."

"Excuse me, Mr. Strang, but—well, so what?"

"Now think of Cliff lying there outside the library. The driver of the car that struck him gets out. And Cliff sees a man bending over him—a man he'd never seen before that evening and whose name he didn't know. Our Mr. Wilson, who'd just moved to Aldershot the day before.

"In the hospital Cliff could have used an identifying word like 'beard' but that might have implicated innocent people. Remember, Mr. Kitrich has a small beard, and even young Quinn was in need of a shave."

The teacher opened the book in front of him to a marked page. "Cliff wanted to describe a particular man," he went on. "A man who, in the words of an Eighteenth Century writer, had a 'large Quantity of Hair which, like a frightful Meteor, covered his whole Face.' Wouldn't you say that was a fairly accurate description of Mr. Wilson?"

Fosse regarded the librarian's bushy black beard and nodded. "But who was that guy writing about?"

"A man who was undoubtedly a central figure in Cliff's article." The little teacher took a breath and lifted a pointing finger high above his head triumphantly.

"Blackbeard the Pirate!"

"Hold it a minute," said Fosse, shaking his head impatiently. "Berlinger never said anything about Blackbeard."

Without a word Mr. Strang passed the book to Fosse, indicating a passage with a slender finger.

" 'Blackbeard the Pirate'," Fosse read slowly, " 'the name given to Edward Teach, born in Bristol, England; died Ocracoke Island, North Carolina, in 1718'."

"Once I'd connected Cliff's word 'Teach' with Blackbeard, the rest was easy," said Mr. Strang. "Since there was no damage to the car you saw, there had to be another car. It was a fairly safe bet the other car belonged to Wilson's sister, and he was keeping it out of sight until the case calmed

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down. It was sure to be at the sister's house—Wilson wouldn't take the risk of hiding it anywhere else."

As he said these words the telephone on the wall behind them rang. Roberts picked it up. After a short conversation he hung up and turned toward Wilson.

"Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum," he said. "C'mon, Blackbeard. Fosse and I are going to book you into a nice jail cell."

"But—"

"That was the lab. The two pieces of glass by Berlinger's body fit the cracked lens of the headlight Fosse found in your sister's rubbish can."

"Q"

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

V. C. Stabile
Vice President and Treasurer

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a *NEW* crime story by

ROBERT TWOHY

Robert Twohy was one of the earliest of EQMM contributors—perhaps the earliest—to write mystery stories of the Absurd. His first was "Routine Investigation" (as ironic a title as can be imagined), published in these pages nearly ten years ago (issue of April 1964). Here is another of Mr. Twohy's oddball stories—far out and offbeat. But we think you'll enjoy it . . .

THE MAN WHO COULD ONLY WRITE THINGS

by ROBERT TWOHY

Burt Dee came upstairs from his workroom in the cellar whose floor was half cemented, half earth. He had a zapped look on his face.

His wife, sagging on the couch in their worn-out living room and reading a magazine, turned her head as she heard the clink of bottle against glass, and watched Burt pour a stiff one.

"Are you planning to get drunk again?" she asked.

He had got drunk last night, when the TV script he had been working on fell apart like old cheesecloth.

He stared at her over the drink, with weird eyes. "Listen, you won't believe this—but I just wrote a horse."

"Wrote a story about a horse, you mean."

"No. What I mean is, I wrote a horse."

"You've been at that liquor already this morning."

"Couple or three shots before I started to work. Then I wrote a horse."

She got up from the couch, a tall, still good-looking but somewhat slack-faced and faded-eyed blonde, and walked over to him, saying coldly, "We're both in our forties. That's too old for nonsense."

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"Listen."

"To what?"

"The horse."

She stared at him, tight-lipped. From below came muffled clops and whinnies.

He said, "It's a horse, I tell you. A small gray honest-to-God not quite full-sized horse."

Rage suddenly seized her. They were behind in the mortgage payments, all she had to wear were souvenirs of yesteryear, they hadn't been out in months, the only invitations they got were invitations to pay overdue bills or various horrible consequences would ensue, and instead of grinding out a saleable TV script, he had cooked up some monstrous prank, so he could yuk about it in a barroom. Probably a barfly friend of his had lent him a horse.

She grabbed him by the front of the sweatshirt that covered his fat little torso, and said, in shaking tones, "Why-have-you-put-a-HORSE-in-the-cellar?"

"I haven't. Leggo. Listen. I was typing and suddenly it was all in high gear, like I was out of myself, typing like mad, knowing something was coming . . . and there was this horse."

She stared at him, and knew that if he wasn't telling the truth, he believed it was the truth.

He put his glass down and said, "I'll show you."

They went down the stairs to the cluttered cellar, cement-floored at this end, raw earth at the other. Standing near Burt's desk and rolling whited eyes at them was a smallish gray horse.

She whispered, "Is it real?"

"Real as any horse in the world."

She stared at the horse, then at him.

"How did you *write* it?"

"Like I said. I was writing a love scene and it was limping along, and then suddenly I was aware that I wasn't writing a love scene any more."

"Was it a horse scene?"

"No. I just became aware that what I was writing was turning into something. I didn't know what it was but I kept on writing and then I looked up and saw it. Then I knew I had written a horse."

They had moved toward the horse, which tossed its head nervously. Back in the dear dead days Lila Dee had lived on an uncle's farm and had developed a fondness for horses, and the memory of this came back to her as she touched the horse's neck—and she smiled.

Burt said, "You smiled."

"Did I?"

"First time in months."

"There hasn't been much to smile about." She gazed at the

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page in Burt's machine. There were a few lines of inane dialogue, then rows and rows of letters, all run together, meaningless.

"This is what you wrote?"

"Yuh. It sure doesn't look like much. But at the time it was like—well, like I was inspired, like."

"I don't understand it at all."

"Why don't we go upstairs and have a drink?"

"What about the horse?"

"We'll throw him down a bunch of carrots."

They went upstairs and talked over how Burt Dee, 44 years old, semi-alcoholic, potbellied, short-sighted, mired in poverty, who in his palmy days in Hollywood ten years ago had been an overpaid hack and who now was, according to his ex-agent, a burned-out hack—how Burt Dee could sit down at an ordinary typewriter in an ordinary mood, and write a horse; and nothing they could think of threw any light on the why or the how. It was just something that had happened.

She said, "Do you think it'll happen again?"

"Who knows?"

She poured them another drink. "If a horse, why not a suitcase full of money? Or an ocelot coat? You once promised me an ocelot coat."

"That was in the good days. They ran out before I got to an ocelot coat."

"You drank too much." She nestled a little closer to him on the battered couch—something she hadn't done in a dog's age. "Try to write a suitcase full of money. Or an ocelot coat."

He smiled vaguely. "Why not?"

"Now?"

"No, I got to be by myself when I write. I can't have a horse staring at me."

"Tomorrow then."

"All right. But it may never happen again."

He got rid of the horse the next day—one of his barfly friends gave him $20 and came by in a rented stake truck and took the horse away as a present for a niece or someone; and Burt gave Lila the $20 and said, "Well, we got *something* out of it, anyway."

She said softly, "Go down and write a suitcase full of money."

"I'll try." He had little or no faith that anything would come of it. He roosted on his stool at the desk in the cellar and started to type, trying to think big money. He started a tale about a millionaire and worked a half hour or so, but nothing happened, and somehow he knew that nothing would. He wadded

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what he had written, tossed it into the wastebasket, and went back upstairs.

She looked at him eagerly, and he shook his head. The light went out of her eyes, and she sighed. He said, "I guess it'll never happen again. It was just some crazy fourth-dimensional thing."

"Well, here's a third-dimensional thing." She showed him what the mail had just brought—a notice of intent to foreclose on the house.

He had a drink. He had another. A perception came to him blindingly: "I can only write tangibles."

"What was that?"

"It just came to me. I can't write *in*tangibles. Money is an intangible."

"Since when?"

"Money's paper. It's a value. I can't write values. I can only write tangibles."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I don't either." But he flew down to the cellar and started to crank out dialogue. The words came sputteringly, as usual. Then suddenly, as yesterday, he went into overdrive: he felt the same exhilaration.

Something was happening, he was writing something, he did not know what. His fingers flew over the keys like Paderewski's, there was no reality, there was no sense of time, he was nothing, he was omnipotent, he was nowhere, he was everywhere . . .

He leaned back on his stool, gasping, spent. He knew he had written something. An ocelot coat? He looked around. There it was. But not an ocelot coat.

"Lila!"

She came bounding down the stairs.

"There."

"My God!"

It was a polar-bear rug.

She whispered, "It's beautiful!"

"Uh huh. Not ocelot, but—on the right track." He stroked the noble glass-eyed head. "These cost a fortune. I know a guy who'll give me $500 for it, cash, no questions asked."

He paced, and at length turned a shining, somewhat red-nosed face to her. "This thing, whatever it is, I've got a feeling it's going to stay with me. I can write tangibles. Anything I want."

Not quite. There were days when he wanted to write a new suit, a zebra-striped couch, a deep freeze, and all he could write was a monogrammed soap dish.

He found that a certain amount, just the right amount, of liquor in the system was one of the keys to success. Too

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much, and things went haywire; too little, and nothing came off. Experiment gave him pretty much the formula. The ocelot coat, which he wrote in the third week after the horse, was without a flaw.

Through his barfly connections he was able to unload the various things he wrote, and at good prices—good for the customers, who asked no questions, and good for himself and Lila. Their standard of living began to climb; they got the deadly finance companies off their backs, and refurnished the house. The liquor cabinet was full of the best.

One terrific day Burt, with a strong feeling, moved everything in the cellar off against the walls, so he had a large clear space, and set his mind on a Rolls-Royce . . . What he wrote was a Falcon, last year's model, but a white station wagon with red-leather seats, nothing to complain of; the pink slip and this year's license tabs were in the glove compartment. He got some of his barfly friends who wouldn't shoot off their mouths to help him remove part of the cellar wall, and they got a ramp in and drove the car out into the back driveway.

Three months after the horse Lila had lost her stringy defeated look, put on 25 pounds, and developed an imperious way of striding into a jewelry or fashion shop and demanding the best. She also developed a yen to partake in the social ramble.

"I want us to join the country club."

She also desired to change his image. "You shouldn't hang around those miserable saloons. People see you drinking with hod carriers and cab drivers and assume you're just another low-down person."

"Well, I'm just a hack who writes things."

"I want to see you always shaved when you go uptown."

"Why?"

"I'm forming new friends now. I don't want them to think you're peculiar."

He gazed at her, and said slowly, "You've changed."

"Certainly I've changed. Money changes a person. If it didn't, what would be the use of it? I want you to change too. I want you to get a rich man's outlook."

"We're not rich."

She smiled sleekly. "We will be. Keep writing things. I want everything we used to have, and then some. I deserve it, for putting up with so much. I demand it. It's my right."

"I'll do my best." And he added, watching her as she strode out, "You *were* a good wife, Lila."

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More months passed. Lila met people of means. They sat around in the living room, and below them, in the cellar, which Burt insisted be left as it had always been, he roosted on his stool and wrote things. He would appear at times among them, but they didn't pay much attention to him—he was just Lila's husband. Lila told her friends he was in creative selling. That sufficed. Nobody especially wanted to know anything more about him.

He had to do a lot of contact work, unloading the things he wrote, and the more they had the more Lila seemed to need. It got treadmilly. It wasn't the way he had pictured it. In Swinny's bar they said, "Burt, you look all drug out. Why'n't you relax?"

"Can't."

"You're working yourself to death. Whatever work you do."

"I write things."

"Well, you don't want to work yourself into the grave."

Lila said, when he came home one afternoon, "This is Yvonne. She's our new cook-and-maid."

"Did we really need one?" But he looked again at Yvonne, and thought, yes, indeed, they had always needed a small dark saucer-eyed French cook-and-maid.

"I have to entertain a lot and Yvonne will take some of the load off me. You've no idea how it is to clean up before and after a gathering."

Three days after Yvonne arrived Burt wrote her a small bracelet. It was presented while Lila was off on a shopping binge.

Yvonne said, "Ooh, Msoo, I could not accept!" She clutched it, her eyes big as soup plates. "It is *tres belle!* How can I ever zank you?"

Burt had an idea how—but he wasn't going to force things.

Lila went places, and had people over, and her world was full. Burt was the machine that provided. As long as the machine functioned, one didn't worry about it, one hardly noticed it was around.

Burt presented Yvonne with other gifts. The boys at Swinny's noticed a spring in his step, color in his cheeks, a brightness in his eye. "You're looking better, Burt. You look like you enjoy life again."

"I do love life again."

Yvonne murmured, "I lof you, Burt."

"I lof you too. I want to marry you."

"*Mais*—there is Madame."

"Yes. Madame. That's how I think of her now too. Well, Madame will have to go, is all."

"She would never divorce.

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You are ze provider."

"Yes. I write things."

"What do you write? I never know."

"Things. Tangibles . . . You're right. She'll never give me a divorce."

When he left Yvonne, there was a strange look in his eyes.

The next morning he went downstairs to work. Not at the desk, but at the uncemented end of the cellar. Because he couldn't write intangibles; and what he was preparing for Lila was something quite intangible.

Finally he mopped his sweating face, propped his tools against the wall, and went upstairs. Yvonne was out. Lila lay on the couch. Burt said, "Come down in the cellar."

"Oh, have you written something special?"

"Uh—well, there's something special for you down there."

Downstairs she looked around. "I don't see anything."

"It's at the far end."

"It's dark, I can't see. I'll get dirt on my slippers. What is it?"

He was behind her. "A little further. You'll see it."

She stopped. "A hole. You've dug a hole!"

"Yes," said Burt, and swung hard with his pick.

Later that afternoon, after he'd had some drinks, he wrote a new tile floor for the entire cellar.

He went upstairs and said to Yvonne, working in the kitchen, "Dinner just for us two tonight. Madame telephoned. She said she's going on a trip."

"Really? Where?"

"She didn't say. She sounded kind of odd. Said she'd write me a letter, explaining." He sniffed at the pots. "What's for dinner?"

The sudden disappearance of Lila Dee caused puzzlement to her friends. They weren't satisfied with Burt's explanation that she had gone suddenly on a trip. They buzzed about it among themselves.

At length someone suggested the police.

Burt had given little thought to possible consequences; as far as Lila was concerned, it was out of sight, out of mind. Yvonne, however, had worries.

"It is very strange about Madame. No word from her. If only we had a letter, in her handwriting, in case people start to wonder."

"Yes," said Burt. They looked at each other. He said, "You got relatives in France?"

"*Oui.*"

"Good." It was 2:00 P.M. on a Friday afternoon. "I'll go down and do some work for a while."

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A letter postmarked from France would be a good thing to have. He would keep it vague. It would be in longhand, telling about tensions she'd been having, an urge to get away for a while, think things out, travel a bit . . . so she and Philip had gone away. Don't try to contact her, she'd write later.

Philip was a nonexistent person. Burt was pleased with the concept. It would give the police a chance to snoop about—and Burt a chance to develop a more permanent disposition of Lila's memory.

He thought that a little later he would present another letter from Lila, hinting at some illness. Finally, there would be a brief, grave note from Philip, saying that Lila had passed away on a cruise; her body had been buried at sea.

Not a perfect solution, far from it. However, sufficient unto the day, and giving him time to hatch up something better, as it might occur.

Lila's handwriting would be no problem. She had no living relatives and had rarely corresponded with anyone—even lately, her contacts were always by telephone. He had taken care of all their business affairs. Her signatures on some documents were all there was on record. He had samples of it, and it would be easy to forge. Nobody could say for sure that a note, slanted like her signature, and showing characteristics in certain letters that could be compared, was not written by her.

Burt took some nips out of his desk bottle and started a draft of the letter on the typewriter.

He wrote, "Dear Burt. I am sorry to have left without notice, but certain tensions, certain—"

Suddenly he felt the overdrive. Damn, he thought, as his vision blurred and his fingers skipped over the keys, I'm writing something. I didn't want to. I just wanted to write this note.

Isn't a note a tangible? But no—he saw the flaw. A *real* letter would be a tangible. But this, what he had set out to write, was a false letter. A hoax. A hoax was an intangible. And he couldn't write intangibles.

Damn. But he couldn't stop. Once started, he just had to pound away until something tangible had been written.

At last came the spent feeling. He shook his head, wiped his glasses, and looked around to see what he had created.

Yvonne, at his shoulder, said, "Msoo!"

He jumped on his stool.

"Msoo, it is a Sergeant Hare—from the police."

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Burt looked beyond her shoulder to a broad-faced man who stood at the bottom of the cellar steps.

Yvonne said, "I knocked, I called—*mais* you were *absorbe.*"

"Yes." In the machine before him was the sheet of paper, with its incriminating message, trailing off in x's. Fortunately the sergeant didn't have a view of it.

"Yes," said Burt, rolling the sheet out, laying it on the desk, and casually sliding other sheets over it. "I was working. I'm a writer, you know. I write things."

Sergeant Hare said, "I am making an inquiry about your wife."

"Yes," said Burt. "She telephoned me some days ago. Said she was going on a sudden trip."

"You have no idea where?"

"No. I expect she'll write soon. She's been behaving somewhat oddly."

"Do you mind if I look around?"

"Help yourself." Burt waved, to indicate the whole cellar, with its perfect tile floor.

Then his eyes stuck out. So did Hare's.

"What's that?" said Hare.

"What's what?" said Burt, though you couldn't miss it, looming palely at the dark far end of the cellar.

Hare walked over to it. He read aloud:

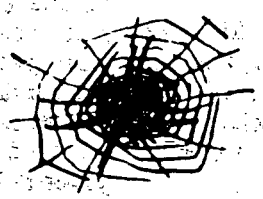
"Under this stone
Lies Lila Dee.
In her 45th year:
R. I. P."

"Well?" said Hare.

Burt walked over. The tombstone was rich gray marble, topped with an exquisite angel. The carving was deep, sure, masterful.

Burt sighed. He had to feel a little pleasure.

"I write good stuff," he said.



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a MR. CAMPION story by

MARGERY ALLINGHAM

As subtly conceived a detective short story as you've read in a long time, and subtly told by one of the great "moderns" of the genre . . . in which you will observe Albert Campion, criminologist, in an oblique way—for the most part, only catching glimpses of him in the wings; yet, despite Campion's being almost offstage, you will learn more about this gentleman detective than if, as is usual for the protagonist, he were onstage front and center . . .

FACE VALUE

by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

"I little thought," wrote Sir Theo in unaccustomed longhand, while the great desk spread round him and the silence of the magnificent room was intense, "I little thought that towards the close of a long, arduous, and, I think I may say with modesty, not unuseful career, I should hear myself described, albeit *sotto voce*, by a senior officer of the Criminal Investigation Department as a Pompous Old Ass."

He hesitated and his pen made little circles in the air above the faint blue lines in the exercise book which Miss Keddey herself had run out to buy for him.

"Pompous old ass." He wrote it again without capitals. "At the age of fifty-three—hardly a dotage, if certain aspects of the last war are any criterion—such an experience must give any sapient" (crossed out) "farseeing" (crossed out) "honest" (underlined) "man furiously to think."

He sat back in the beautiful chair which he had inherited from Sir Joseph, the first head of the great firm, read what he had written, and permitted a dismayed expression to flit over his handsome clean-shaven face. He removed his eyeglass and changed it for the pair of bent pince-nez which he kept for

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reading contracts, and, since the room was deserted and the door locked, spoke aloud:

"No need to be a ruddy fool!" He bent again to write. "I have only one natural gift—my success had been due entirely to hard work—and I may at times have appeared vain of it. *Nemo mortalium omnibus horis sapit.* But the fact remains, I have noticed and remarked on it time and time again, *I never forget a face.* My family, Miss Keddey—who has been my secretary for twenty years—my colleagues on the Board, my brother justices on the Bench, the officers with whom—despite my great age!—I was privileged to serve in the Southern Command, everybody who knows me, will confirm that, pompous though I may be, this is my undisputed gift.

"It has shown itself many times. When Robert St. John walked into the Club after thirty years, wearing a great black beard as long as one's arm, who recognized him before he had satisfied even the wine waiter? And who—but this is unnecessary. My gift is undisputed and the matter I have to consider here is more complex.

"I come now to Nicholas Parish. This young man entered the firm, of which I have the honor to be the Chairman, some few years before the war. I knew his father and did not like him, but it is typical of me that a circumstance of that sort is more likely to predispose me in favor of a youngster than to detract. Ass though I am, I try to be fair.

"Young Parish is handsome, flashy—by my aged standards—and, according to my wife, who met him once in this office, dangerous, whatever that may mean.

"From the start he showed force which I admired, an unconventional streak which was all very well since he had the wit to control it, and a genius for pushing a job through to its conclusion—the trait which made me like him. At one time he was in charge of our new Psychological department.

"During the period when I was the 'unfit' amateur colonel in an army department of 'unfit' amateurs, stationed in a sector of the South Coast which, by the grace of God, was never attacked (Ass perhaps, but not Fool, Mr. Superintendent), I found him a most efficient major. It would hardly be true to describe us as wartime comrades, for I am an old hand in the service of this firm and I have no illusions regarding friendships between the head of such a concern and

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the men who must ever, to their lives' end, remain subordinates. But we got on very smoothly. I think I may say that. Very smoothly indeed.

"After the war we returned to our respective desks. In a short time his desk became a little larger. Mine remained as it is—as a matter of fact, so Sharman of the Bank was telling me (his hobby is irrelevant figures)—the largest, save one, in the world.

"Our association, Parish's and mine, was never social. Theobald Park is in the country and when my wife makes what small effort she can to entertain in these times, the names of the junior members of my staff are not added to her secretary's list. However, we lunched together on occasion and, while he introduced me to the amusing if frivolous *Wardrobe*, I have taken him to the Club. In fact, I believe he is on the waiting list so that, should he live a hundred years, poor fellow, his name may well come up before the Committee before he dies.

"That is how matters stood on the twenty-third of October last, the date which the Superintendent finds of such absorbing and recurrent interest. It was the night of our regimental dinner. I was to speak and I had, I confess, taken Parish's opinion on the draft of the few words I intended to say. He was very helpful; I can see him now with that flicker in his dark eyes as some little joke of mine touched him.

"We were the only two senior officers from this firm attending and it seemed natural that we should go together. As I told the Superintendent and that odd, evasive fellow, Campion, who came with him on the third occasion, I have no idea who suggested it. My impression is that it was so obvious that it needed no suggestion. Frankly, I cannot envisage Parish suggesting a course of action to me; I am the natural leader in any decision, great or small. The only faintly unusual feature of our excursion was that I offered to pick him up at his home in Morter Street midway between the Club and the Porchester where we were to dine.

"The Superintendent, a squat obstinate man, did his best to get me to say that Parish *asked me* to fetch him, which would have been absurd. The younger man, Campion (some sort of consultant whose vague pale face I have seen somewhere unexpected, possibly in the bar of the House of Lords), muttered something more sensible about a man not being able to refuse a civility in certain

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circumstances, but I could not acquiesce. I am, as it were, the Captain of the Ship, and since I went to Morter Street I must have arranged it. I remember that both Parish and I spoke of the difficulties of parking at night and the inadvisability of taking two cars.

"His house is a pleasant, two-story affair, worth every penny of the rent he must pay for it. It is a cottage in London, snug and yet dignified. I noticed the leaded lights and the frilled muslin curtains particularly—with a pretty woman looking out from between them it might all have been on the stage of the old Gaiety. When Nicholas came running out to tell me we had made a slight mistake in the time and still had twenty minutes, I was only too delighted to step in and take a very good dry sherry with him.

"Poor little woman! She rose from the flowered couch which all but smothered her and greeted me like an old friend. In the discreet lighting I like, I saw her small face glowing and her eyes shine. Despite the decrepitude which is so evident to the Superintendent, I felt the warmer for her welcome.

"She held out both hands to me and said, 'Sir Theo! Do you remember me?'

"Well, of course I did! And I was happy to tell her so. Since this report is for a special purpose, I may admit that when I felt her hands tremble in mine it gave me a more pleasurable sensation than I have derived from anything of the kind for very many years. I remembered her face, naturally, but not only that. As soon as Parish mentioned Brabbington I was able to tell them when and where I had the pleasure of being introduced to her—at a sports meeting just before I left the army. At that time she was in uniform herself and those heavy costumes do not reveal a woman's shape in the same way as does an expensive rose-silk gown—they are not designed to. She made even more impression on me at this second meeting, while we chatted in her charming room.

"I have been questioned again and again about this simple interlude and I have kept nothing back. The younger people were on edge. I admit it and I cannot think it strange or sinister. The first time Sir Joseph visited my wife and me, *we* were on edge.

"We drank excellent sherry and talked nonsense, or I did, mainly about Mrs. Parish's charm. When their clock struck the half hour, Nicholas and I left for the dinner together.

"Poor little woman! She

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came to the door with us to kiss her husband. They were smiling brightly at each other and the only thing I remarked which was at all untoward—I only remember it now as I come to write—was that she refused a wrap and swore she was not cold although I noticed, as I bent towards her fair head, that her teeth were chattering.

"I last saw her waving to us from the bright green door and after that, until the message from the police was brought in to him at the table some hours afterwards, *Parish did not leave my side.*

"I saw the waiter bring him the note and heard his muttered word of excuse but I did not know, of course, what had called him away. Speeches were over by that time and, having done my duty, I was dozing by my glass. In wartime I discovered that I am no soldier, in peacetime I find myself doubly convinced.

"The shock came when I had got back to the Club, and was just in my room. Johnson came hurrying up to ask me if I would see an officer from Scotland Yard.

"That was my first visit from the Superintendent and he told me the news bluntly. At half-past nine that evening Mrs. Parish had been found by her sister, who had visited her unexpectedly, lying in her bedroom with her head smashed in and her pretty face obliterated by many savage blows. The maid had been out all evening, but the sister, it appeared, had a key.

"The Superintendent wanted to know, and he spoke with a frankness which set me wondering about the law of slander, if I could give 'the husband,' as he called poor Parish, 'a clean sheet'!

"I soon got rid of the man. Parish had never left my side.

"Yet, in the morning, before I was up, the man was back again. He appeared with very little ceremony and requested me, somewhat amazingly I thought, to get up and go with him to a mortuary to identify the body. I own I made every effort to avoid the unpleasant experience, but, on the telephone, my solicitor was quite clear if not helpful, and at length I consented.

"We drove to a place which I found chill and there I saw what I expected to see—a fairheaded flower of a woman mutilated by unexampled brutality.

"The Superintendent—I hardly suppose any two men have ever disliked each other so thoroughly on a brief acquaintance—asked me if I could swear that the woman before

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me was the woman whom I had met on the evening before. He struck me as insane. At Parish's house I had met Parish's wife, whom I knew. Subsequently her relatives had identified these repellant remains as the poor lady's body.

"I waited until I got outside and then gave him no more than he deserved; when I got back Miss Keddey put me through to the Commissioner with whom I had a word. That, one would have thought, should have been the end. Not a bit of it! The moment I was available —it was not until the evening— the unchastened Superintendent called again, bringing with him this consultant fellow, Campion.

"I do not admit that I took a liking to Albert Campion but there was certainly no offense in him. He behaved like a gentleman and his pale eyes behind his horn-rims were not unintelligent. Silencing his companion, who made me think of some square dog who was following him, he mentioned some gossip which I confess was new to me.

"Intimate friends of Mr. and Mrs. Parish had hinted that the couple did not get on. I was astonished to hear it but I know how difficult it is to judge such matters from a brief visit. Campion assured me that a solicitor had been consulted in regard to divorce proceedings but that Mrs. Parish had refused to sue. He told me, but it was hearsay, that Parish was reputed to have many liaisons—typists, shopgirls, minor actresses. It was hardly my affair. He told me the two had separate rooms and never dined together. I shook my head; it is extraordinary how other people live.

"Finally, since the interview was taking longer than I had time for, I invited them to put their cards on the table. Immediately the Superintendent, springing from the leash, advanced an extraordinary theory which I can only think was his own. He suggested that Parish had been free to murder his wife before I arrived at the house and had successfully convinced me that the woman he introduced as his wife was the one I had met at Brabbington. It was so absurd and so insulting that I told him of my peculiarity—I never forget a face. I added that I was prepared to go into a witness box and swear it. My old friend, Lord Justice Blossom, might, I thought, confirm me in this modest boast.

"He left after that and it was as he went out of the door (Miss Keddey is still tremulous) that he permitted himself the epithet with which I opened

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this account. Pompous, old, and an ass.

"As I recovered from my amazement I saw that this fellow Campion was still there. He has a certain charm.

" 'Zeal has no grace,' he said and made me an adroit little compliment on the clarity of my evidence. Before very long—I forget how it came about—we were chatting of other things and I found that he was a member of the Junior Greys from whom the Club sometimes accepts hospitality at spring-cleaning time.

"At length I noticed he was hesitating, not venturing to bother me, and, as is my way when people are civil, I gave him a lead. He made what he admitted himself was a very odd request. He asked me to go with him to buy some flowers.

"Why I should have gone, merely to please him, must remain the only mystery in this episode.

"We entered the brightly lit Mayfair shop, hot and dark and smelling like a funeral, and a young woman came forward to serve us.

"Just for an instant I felt a sudden qualm. The likeness was in her movement, the eagerness of her walk, the brightness in her eyes, but at once I saw that I was wrong and I blamed the Superintendent for making a normally nerveless man fanciful. This girl had black hair, the blackest I have ever seen in a European; her face was pallid as wax and she kept her eyes downcast. Her clothes were nondescript and her voice was no more than a whisper.

"Campion spent so much time buying a few violets from her that I suspected him of not knowing his own mind but we came out at last and stood on the damp pavement together, near a street lamp.

"He gave me that gentle smile of his which reminds one that he has not the drive to make a success of his odious profession and said softly, 'Of course, *she* has a face anyone could forget—even you, Sir Theo.'

" 'Who?' said I. 'The shop-girl? No, my boy, I shall know her again if ever I see her—which I doubt.'

"He sighed at that. 'So,' he said. 'In that case I don't suppose you ever will.' Then, with a swiftness which surprised me, he pulled out a photograph and showed it to me in the light. It was one of these fuzzy modern prints showing a woman in Service uniform. She was the same type as Mrs. Parish, or the girl in the flower shop for that matter, but the photograph was bad and did not flatter her. She was babyish round—no animation.

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"I guessed his plan and smiled.

"'I remember her when she was like that—at Brabbington,' I said. 'It's no good your worrying, Campion. I never do. I never forget a face.'

"I heard his laugh of resignation and we prepared to part. And then he shook me. 'Yes,' he said gently. 'A great natural gift, Sir Theo—but it's *not* your only one, you know.'"

The broad nib came to rest and the writer looked up. He was cramped and cold but there was determination in his small judicial mouth. He turned a page once more.

"I have made this record," he wrote, "because it was an axiom of my predecessor's that, when confronted by a grave and knotty problem, a man should sit down alone and transcribe his reflections in longhand, not for the edification of posterity, but for the clarification of his own mind.

"For some weeks I have been considering whom I should send to fill a recent vacancy, which has occurred with tragic suddenness, in the service of this firm in South America. The needed man should be resourceful, quick to action, as cunning as his enemies and not overburdened with conventional scruples. He should also understand men. If he succeeds he may become a minor dictator. If he does not succeed he may die.

"At this moment our Overseas Manager is waiting near his telephone; I have promised to give him my decision tonight.

"Shall I send Nicholas Parish?"

Sir Theo closed the exercise book. For a moment or two he sat, chin on hand, half aware that the glow from the coal fire opposite was turning his black coat to crimson and his linen to ermine.

At length he rose, tore the book to quarters, and threw them on the coals. As soon as the last charred flake flew upward he smiled briefly, returned to the desk, and picked up the telephone.

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Following last month's disappointment, when luck provided no worthy new title, it is a relief that for February I can offer four. If one of these is a collection of tales from days gone by, and another the paperback reprint of an espionage thriller two years old, each acquires glittering newness in its present form. From detection to mystery-adventure and from espionage to short stabs of dirty work, then, our course runs thus:

The Thirteenth Trick, by Russell Braddon (Norton, $4.95), snares us at once into emotion as well as classic detection. Either straightforward-seeming Mark Gifford or sardonic Robert Gifford, his bitter and crippled ex-athlete brother, must be the "Motorways Maniac" who has been killing fair-haired young girls near Aylesbury in rural England.

Mark, a P. & O. ship's officer on leave, is visiting Robert's cottage when police find the body of the fourth murder victim in the back row of a cinema at Aylesbury. The wordy card game between Mark and Robbie, those two clever fellows, is joined by Detective Superintendent Cheadle, as clever as either but more patient than both. Even with so narrow a field of suspects, by adroit jugglery the author keeps tension at fever pitch until the game's last trick is won after near-fatal archery at tea-time.

Years ago, in *Cards on the Table*, Dame Agatha Christie spun one of her best stories round just four suspects. Mr. Braddon shows equal virtuosity with only two. And all the clues are there.

With *The Turquoise Lament*, by John D. MacDonald (Lippincott, $6.95), the first Travis McGee adventure to appear originally in hardcover finds Trav involved even more than usual with a fetching female who has appealed for help.

Linda "Pidge" Lewellen, now married to big, good-natured Howie Brindle, is the daughter of Trav's late friend, Professor Ted Lewellen, who has left his daughter a fortune derived from marine salvage but apparently has not left her the key to further marine salvage worth millions more.

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Summoned to Hawaii by a frantic phone-call, McGee finds Pidge dithering after inexplicable, haunted occurrences with her new husband aboard their own boat. Well-meaning Howie Brindle can't possibly want to murder her, and yet what's some explanation for the inexplicable?

In recent books the author has abandoned detection for near-mystery-adventure in which hypnotic narrative skill keeps us on edge even when most perplexities have been resolved. Mr. MacDonald has never done better than this financial and emotional whirlwind, from opening challenge to sensational climax and wry, ironic epilogue. Since every character takes on the flesh and blood of life, you're always safe with Travis McGee.

Provided with a new face by plastic surgery after ambush in Vietnam, Captain David Garrison, the very sympathetic hero of Walter Wagner's *Swap* (Pocket Books, $1.25), embarks for Russia on a secret mission as danger-fanged as any jungle foray.

Implacably the Soviets hold fourteen-year-old Sonya Brodsky, only Russian survivor of the millionaire American Brodskys, and won't release her at any price; Garrison must slip past the iron curtain to effect a rescue. In Moscow, where Sonya disappears and can't be found, the iron curtain has become a stone wall.

But Garrison, himself expert at ambush, conceives his plan as our scene shifts from Moscow to Paris for an International Arms Conference. Assisted by two Green Beret sergeants and an Israeli secret agent, he kidnaps the important Soviet delegate he will exchange for one helpless child.

At breakneck-paced action amid flying bullets, with beautiful Elizabeth Clement standing by, snatch and exchange are accomplished despite deadly intrusion by the red Chinese. Frustrating a Soviet counter-move to kill everybody rather than yield any point at all, Garrison rescues young Sonya and emerges triumphant in the best cloak-and-dagger thriller of recent years.

The Further Rivals of Sherlock Holmes, edited by Sir Hugh Greene (Pantheon, $6.95), comprises Sir Hugh's third and, he tells us, likely his last collection of tales from 1891 to 1914, when Baker Street dominated all. Though the supply has now run short, here are thirteen flashes of sound investigation or ingenious plot from lesser sleuths than Sherlock and lesser craftsmen than Doyle.

Try M. McD. Bodkin's "Murder by Proxy." Dip in anywhere; you will find this book true stimulus when time hangs heavy and television commercials can no longer be endured.

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This is the 399th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine'. . . a smooth tale of a perfect caper, smoothly planed and well crafted . . .

The author, Gerald Tomlinson, was 40 when he submitted "The Perfectionist." After graduation from Marietta College he taught in a junior high school in upstate New York, served two years in Army military intelligence, attended law school for a year and a half, then switched to the publishing business, first as a mail-order book editor and for the last ten years as a high-school English textbook editor.

Mr. Tomlinson's main hobby is cabinetmaking. He wrote us that he "will soon have the house filled with shelves, serving carts, consoles, end tables, and bookcases." We suggest: write more mysteries while you still have room . . .

THE PERFECTIONIST

by GERALD TOMLINSON

"Let's go, Deutsch. Forty minutes to Grand Central. Get a move on."

Ray Deutsch bent respectfully from the waist and closed the rear door of the black Cadillac limousine. Inside, Frank Prescott, the New Jersey construction magnate, syndicate boss, and multimillionaire, leaned back to read his *Daily News*. On the seat beside Prescott rested the small brown suitcase that Deutsch had been waiting for. Today was the day.

Deutsch, pale and rigid, watched the double row of poplars streak by for the last time. No more Jersey roads, he thought. No more "Pretty Boy" Prescott. No more playing the cowed chauffeur to a loud-mouthed mobster. He smiled tightly.

Prescott's Cadillac, hearse-quiet at 60 miles an hour, flashed south on the Palisades Parkway. Deutsch took pride in his driving. He was quick, alert, canny, a perfectionist behind

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the wheel. In seven years of driving for Frank Prescott he had never so much as scratched a fender.

The day was sunny, crisp, and bright with promise. Two miles south of the Alpine exit, with the road clear in both directions, Deutsch made the decisive move of his life, the culminating act of his 53 years. Bracing himself under the shoulder safety belt, he slammed his foot down hard on the brake pedal. The tires screamed.

Prescott, unbelted as always, rose from his seat like an Apollo at liftoff. His head ricocheted off the ceiling, smashed into the plastic partition that separated him from Deutsch, and the boss of northern New Jersey, unconscious, sagged to the floor like a strand of boiled spaghetti.

Deutsch, nervously humming an old tune, resumed his normal driving. At the Englewood Cliffs exit he left the Parkway and headed south on Hudson Terrace. He passed a dozen large apartment buildings before turning in at the entrance to the Quebec. He drove to the back of the building, where an 800-car parking lot, whose spaces were unnumbered and unreserved, stood half empty at this hour on a Tuesday morning.

Pulling in beside a new dusty dark-green Plymouth, Deutsch opened the rear door of the Cadillac, removed Prescott's suitcase, smiled again at the motionless form, nodded quietly and triumphantly, and closed the door on his past life.

Unlocking a new door, he slid behind the wheel of the Plymouth.

Ray Deutsch's drive to a tiny A-frame house at the northern edge of the Catskills took less than two hours. He owned the A-frame. He had bought it, along with the ten wooded acres surrounding it, six months before in the name of Alfred A. Stocker. The green Plymouth also belonged to Alfred A. Stocker. So did Deutsch's new driver's license, a small checking account balance at the Hancock National Bank, and an oil-company credit card.

The A-frame offered ideal seclusion. The nearest town, Roscoe, was eight miles away and had about 900 people. The nearest house, half a mile away, was occupied by a retired couple in their seventies.

Deutsch carried the suitcase into the living room and set it down before the brick fireplace. He ran his hand through his thinning gray hair, reached tentatively toward the lock on the suitcase, then turned away. Too much of his future rested on the contents of that bag for him

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to be hasty. He could take a whole year, if he wanted to, before looking into the suitcase, a whole year to sit by the fire and read the hundreds of paperbacks that lined the walls of the living room.

Why hurry? Besides, there were things to get rid of. The chauffeur's uniform had to go. All those identifying cards and papers, all the bureaucratic biography of Ray Deutsch had to go. All 53 years of Ray Deutsch had to disappear up the chimney, dissolve into the blue September sky.

He moved the suitcase to the one chair in the room, a lush leather easy chair that a chrome Kovaks reading lamp pointed down on. A year of one's life deserved such a luxurious throne, Deutsch had decided when he was furnishing the house. The chair and lamp were the only extravagant items he had bought in years.

Except for the driver's license in Deutsch's name, he had packed his identifying possessions two weeks earlier in the trunk compartment of the Plymouth. In the days prior to that a number of unmistakable signs had told him that a Prescott payoff was in the offing.

After starting a fire in the fireplace, Deutsch removed the cards and papers of his lifetime from the Plymouth and piled them in a neat stack on the floor. He then crossed to the kitchen, stepped outside, and removed a bottle of Moet from under the wooden step. Its temperature seemed correct.

Back in the living room, as he was about to pop the cork, a thought crossed his mind. He paused, his foot on the stone hearth. Had the hour arrived? Should he really destroy Ray Deutsch, destroy him totally, before he learned how much Alfred A. Stocker was worth? (The genuine Alfred A. Stocker had died at the age of two and was buried in Newburgh, New York—an element that he had picked up from Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal.)*

Deutsch considered the matter. He decided that his timing made little difference. Ray Deutsch was dead anyway—the sooner he was completely eliminated the better.

Memories of a radio commercial passed through his head. The commercial advertised a movie designed to leech on the success of "The Godfather." It said something about not stealing the syndicate's money—"stealing the mob's money isn't robbery, it's suicide." Deutsch shuddered. He knew it could be suicide. He had taken that into account. He had taken everything into account.

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He released the cork. The bubbling champagne flowed from the bottle in a golden fountain. He stood facing the fireplace, the remnants of his old life at his feet. The only thing he regretted losing was the last photograph of his wife, taken a year before she had died. But the image of Flora Alvarez Deutsch had to go too. Stocker intended to be a bachelor.

Picking up the pile of computer-pulp and paper nostalgia, he flung it into the blazing fire, blowing a final kiss to his wife's picture. Then he clinked his glass gently against the bluestone mantelpiece. "Ray Deutsch is dead. Long live Al Stocker." He said the words aloud, in a low hollow voice. They sounded more like a benediction than an invocation, but the somber tone was wrong. Deutsch was giddy with anticipation.

Alfred A. Stocker knew he was rich. He had no idea of the exact amount of money, but he did know that Frank Prescott's personal payoffs were big. Lieutenants and sergeants handled the small change. When Prescott took a trip with his small brown suitcase the balance of payments in the underworld was notably affected.

The Moet was brut and glorious. Deutsch—no, Stocker—poured himself another. This time he toasted the unopened suitcase. "To Pretty Boy Prescott. May he take his loss like a man."

Alfred A. Stocker giggled. He seldom giggled, but at this moment he had reason to be cheerful. Prescott could hardly report the incident to the police. The money that he handled he handled in secrecy. Income-tax evasion was a concept well known to him. More than that, more than the origin of the money, the intended purpose of the money should stop any publicity. It was payoff money, bribe money. It was almost certainly headed for a big-time official. "Why were you carrying X-thousands of dollars in your car, Mr. Prescott? . . . Well, er, you see . . ." No, it was not going to be reported to the police.

But it was going to be reported to somebody. There would be clever men, resourceful and dangerous men, looking for Ray Deutsch. And they would look hard, if the suitcase contained what it must contain. There would probably be Lou "Sonny" Visconti, an ex-longshoreman who was now a small-arms expert and Prescott's bodyguard. There might be Arnold "Hatchet Man" Fein, a recent favorite, whose methods were messy but effective.

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Others came to mind. Lars "The Lip" Swenson. Mike "Teddy O" O'Brien. Others.

Alfred A. Stocker. Yes, it was Alfred A. Stocker, no one else, who poured a third glass from the bottle. He toasted Visconti. "Good luck, you stupid—no, make it bad luck." And he sat down at the side of the hearth to preview his future.

One year in the A-frame house. He was safe—he was sure of it. They could never find him here. He was untraceable. He had laid his plans with utter precision, had confided in no one. He was a perfectionist, and he had overlooked nothing.

The suitcase was an unimpressive piece of luggage, the kind a college student might take on an overnight trip to his parent's home. But Ray Deutsch—no, not Ray Deutsch, Alfred A. Stocker—had wagered his life on it. And he had done it with style, not like Deutsch at all who for 53 years had never gambled. One big gamble now—the only one he would ever make.

He had to see the contents of the suitcase. Would there be $100,000? Please, yes. Make it at least $100,000. That was enough. Not a fortune. No big dent in the Prescott bankroll. Not enough to make Lou Visconti, that longshoreman who looked like a croupier, give up his important assignments and devote full attention to the missing chauffeur and the stolen suitcase.

It was time for the opening. Swaying slightly, on his feet now, relaxed and tense at once, he knew he was not going to wait a year, not an hour, to find out what he had. Even if he had gained nothing—even if all he found was a change of underwear—he was committed to the scheme. He was going to spend a year in the Catskills whether he had a fortune or a dirty T-shirt. He had to. He could not circulate until he had become a different person—not just a different person on a driver's license, but a different person in fact, a man who could safely venture out among the Viscontis, the Feins, the Swensons, the O'Briens, and still be unrecognized. And that would take time.

The suitcase was unlocked. He lifted one side. Bright light from the Kovaks lamp shone on the exposed contents. He was right, of course. He knew he would be right. Perfection in all things. It had been his stepmother's watchword.

He kept his excitement suppressed. Deutsch's emotions were always suppressed. But he did feel a slight tremor, a flutter in his chest, as he looked down

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on the greenbacks. His hand went to his heart. A slight shortness of breath. But no wonder.

Rows and rows of twenty-dollar bills filled the suitcase. They were banded with the amounts marked, but Alfred A. Stocker, wealthy bachelor recluse with time on his hands, counted them all, counted them down to the last bill: $180,000.

What had they been intended to do? What would they have bought at Grand Central, at City Hall, in Albany, in Trenton? Stocker poured another glass of Moet and settled back on the hearth. The books on the shelves looked down on him hazily now, invitingly. Six hundred books, purchased five or ten at a time in Brentano's on Fifth Avenue at 47th Street, while Deutsch—*Stocker*—had waited for Prescott to complete his business in the city.

Deutsch finished the champagne, laid the closed suitcase carefully on the floor, chose a book at random—it was a mystery novel—adjusted his elegant lamp, and began to read.

Six months later he was still reading. No unexpected event had broken the routine of his days. Each morning he went to the small shopping center in Roscoe, picked up the *Daily News* at the drug store, then a bag of groceries at the supermarket. He spoke to no one and never ventured farther away than Hancock.

Every day he read a mystery book from ten until one and in the afternoons he read nonfiction, mainly true crime or American history, with emphasis on the Second World War. In the evenings he watched cable television.

Deutsch altered his physical appearance with grotesque efficiency. At the outset of his stay he went on a 6000-calorie-a-day diet. Always before that a light eater and an active man, he began to expand, to soften, to balloon. Fat surrounded him like a shield of blubber.

The diet made him ill at first, but he kept at it. Eventually he came to like eating mountains upon mountains of food at each sitting. From ascetic sparrow to gluttonous hippo in a year. An effective disguise. Effective, too, was the full gray beard that soon wreathed his face.

It was during the seventh month of exile that he received his only scare. He had just returned from the shopping center, a few minutes before nine on a chilly March morning. As he eased out of the car he saw a metallic-gray Cadillac with New Jersey plates round a bend in the road and slow down

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in front of his A-frame house. It came to a stop. A squat man with enormous shoulders emerged from the driver's seat and approached.

Watch out! Visconti? But was it? The man came closer. Deutsch, ex-chauffeur and open target, stood transfixed, his eyes glazed. No, it wasn't Visconti. Still—but no, definitely no. The burly man gave him a gap-toothed smile and growled, "Hi, pop. Which way to Roscoe?"

Stocker's breath escaped slowly from between his whitened lips and gray beard. "Straight down the road eight miles. You can't miss it. There's a sign that says, 'Welcome to Roscoe.'"

And that was it. The rest of the time ticked away. There were a couple of references to Frank Prescott in the *Daily News*. The first of these relieved Stocker. It let him know that the boss of northern New Jersey had not been killed by a blow on the head; and while Stocker was pretty sure of that anyway, he could not be absolutely sure. The first three weeks after coming to the A-frame house he had not gone out to buy a newspaper. However, he had watched TV, and he assumed that Pretty Boy was important enough to rate an evening news obituary.

So Prescott was alive, testifying before a Congressional committee, winning construction contracts in Teaneck and Fort Lee, and, best of all, failing to find, maybe even forgetting about, his former chauffeur.

Stocker's plan called for him to leave the A-frame on Monday, August 30, three days short of one year from the date of his "inheritance." Prescott knew Deutsch's mania for exactness, and Alfred A. Stocker accordingly wanted to avoid the anniversary.

On the morning of August 30, a clear day similar to the one on which he had become rich, Stocker packed two suitcases into the Plymouth and set out for Kennedy Airport. He took a roundabout route to avoid any travel on too-familiar roads. By now, however, his disguise was total. He weighed 253 pounds and his full beard was almost white.

To his meager collection of identifying cards and papers he had added a New York State voter-registration card. He was heading for three days in Nassau, the Bahamas. Actually, it would be forever in Nassau if he liked it as well as he expected to. But three days were all he intended to declare. For that short a stay he would need only superficial identification.

He left the Plymouth on

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upper Broadway, near Yonkers, a parking lot for abandoned and quickly stripped cars, as he knew from past observation. He hailed a cab for JFK. The driver, mercifully, was one of the silent ones. Stocker had no wish to talk about his past, present, or future. All he wanted was to be safely chauffeured toward paradise.

But as he approached the airport he began to get nervous. It was the first time in months he had felt any fear. There was no reason to, of course. He knew it. The plan was perfect. Every track had been covered. There was no way on earth that Prescott and his men could have traced Alfred A. Stocker. The old name—what was it?—was gone; the old appearance was gone; Stocker was a short plane hop away from retirement in the sun.

He tipped the cab driver handsomely, the way a prosperous man should tip his driver. Still, he wished the inner trembling would stop. This should be the happiest time of his life, not one of the most fearful. He fought down the chill.

Entering the International Building, he went straight to the BOAC counter to check his bags. His ticket, purchased by mail a month earlier, was in order, and Stocker received nonsmokers' seat 9A. It was two hours until takeoff, and he intended to spend it reading Ladislas Farago's *The Game of the Foxes*.

He approached a molded plastic chair in the center of the waiting room. As he was about to sit down, a tall blond man strode toward him, a quizzical expression on his face. Stocker hesitated for a moment and stared at the stranger. Visconti? Dyed hair? Fear began to rise. Silly. Stupid. It wasn't Visconti. Take it easy. Stay calm, he told himself. Stay calm.

The blond man nodded toward him and said in a low pleasant voice, "Deutsch?"

Stocker's hand shot to his chest. He staggered backward, a look of horror shattering his broad face. He tried to scream "No!" but nothing came out but a whimper. Pain crisscrossed his upper torso as he fell to the floor, writhing, face up. His breath exploded into the void, once, twice, three times.

He saw someone in uniform. The blond man appeared shocked. Sunlight streamed through the plate glass, striking Deutsch's distorted face. Within seconds the solar light went out: all the lights in the world went out.

A policeman kneeling beside him said, "Please move away,

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folks. The gentleman is dead." Then the officer, a young sergeant who seemed unconcerned by the hubbub, got up and turned to the blond man. "Could you tell me what happened, sir? You were talking to him, I think."

The blond man stared at the policeman, stunned. He spoke in a low voice: *"Es ist schrecklich. Ich wollte Ihn nur fragen ob er Deutsch spricht."*

The policeman asked, "Can't you speak English?"

The blond man shuddered. "Sorry. In my shock . . .What I just said was, 'It's terrible. I only wanted to ask him if he speaks German.'"

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THE QUICK RED FOX

by GERALD TOMLINSON

"I'm afraid you've failed the polygraph test, Mr. Older. In fact, you come across on it as a terrible liar."

Billy Claiburne scowled at the earnest personnel secretary who had just spoken to him. "Drat and double drat. Does that mean I can't get a job at Fargo Distillers?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it does. You have no idea how careful we have to be in this business. The amount of stealing that goes on here is something awful."

Claiburne's red-orange eyebrows rose in an expression of professional interest. "You don't say."

"Oh, yes. Just last week one of our fork-lift operators was arrested after setting up his own cocktail lounge in Cold Spring Harbor. It was stocked to the roof with Fargo whiskey, all stolen."

"You can't trust anybody these days, Miss Dillon. Now, if you'll just point me toward the Men's Room."

The secretary glanced over her right shoulder, letting her eyes

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do the pointing. "Down that hall, five doors on the left, Mr. Older. I'm sorry about the lie-detector test."

"Don't let it worry you a bit," said Claiburne, heading toward the teak-paneled canyon, wheezing as he went. At 45 his body was scrawny and consumptive-looking, a liability in his line of work. But he had assets. His bespectacled blue eyes were brightly alert, his senses acute, and his mind was a cunning computer of risks.

At the end of the hall, in a small empty office lined with four-color posters for Old Chisholm Bourbon, he saw what he wanted, an IBM Executive typewriter. Entering the office, he pulled a printed note from the pocket of his red plaid jacket, laid it on the desk, stifled a cough, bent over, yanked the electric plug from a floor socket, and copped the 341st typewriter of his career. The note read:

Your typist's life is drab and gray,
Your pay is low, your work's a pain.
But you can take a rest today,
The Quick Red Fox has struck again.

For posterity he had provided an autograph, *The Quick Red Fox*, and underneath the signature he had scrawled 341/500.

It was past one o'clock, well into the lunch hour at Fargo Distillers. Voices issued from a cafeteria far down another hall, but Claiburne passed no one on his way to the side door of the two-story suburban office building. Into the passenger's seat of his car went the IBM, into the driver's seat went The Quick Red Fox himself, and off went the fastest typewriter thief in the East.

His destination was the C&M Typewriter Company of lower Manhattan, dealers in new and used typewriters, operating out of a shabby store in a rundown West Side neighborhood. He parked in his reserved spot in a red-signed, yellow-curbed tow-away zone, which was one of Police Sergeant Alex McSween's many streetside sources of income.

Three doors toward Ninth Avenue the dusty plate-glass window of C&M offered the best deals in town on new typewriters, unheard-of low prices on used typewriters, and prompt repair service, no savings stated, on any make of typewriter.

"Hey, Jesse," Claiburne rasped as he closed the door, "there's an IBM in my car. Grab it before the blind beggar gets it. He's eyeing it, and he looks like he could use a fix. Where's Bats?"

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"Up in Westchester, man. He said to tell you he'd be back at three." Jesse Plummer, a retired railroad porter, started toward the front door at his Penn Central shuffle. Plummer treated The Quick Red Fox with easy familiarity, but Bats was quite another matter. Jesse regarded Bats Masterson, master criminal and Claiburne's tycoon-partner, with mumbling, sycophantic awe. So did many other people.

Claiburne's office, a cubicle in mauve enamel and frosted glass, was tucked in a corner at the right front of the store. The Fox shed his red plaid jacket—only a costume since Claiburne preferred dark pinstripes—and stepped through the doorway.

Instantly his left arm was twisted like a carriage-return bar as someone applied a sharp upward thrust on it from behind. Pinned nose-to-frost against the glass, he started to sputter. He was stopped by the affable growl of Sergeant Alex McSween. "Didn't hurt you, did I, Fox-O? Listen. What I want to know is, where's the birthday present? It's three days past due. My wife wants a night out and my kids are asking for their allowance."

Claiburne muttered "Drat" through clenched dentures. "Double drat. Did I ever miss a payment, you dumb ox? Get your hands off me. Money for parking, money for protection, twelve birthdays a year—you've got a better partnership than Bats."

McSween dropped the clamped arm and stepped back, squinting at Claiburne's bottle-lensed eyeglasses, which were catching a ray of spring sunshine through the grimy window. The sergeant's heavy jowls worked over a stick of chewing gum, and his heavy-lidded eyes were quizzical.

"I don't know, Billy. As a matter of fact, I think we both better watch out. I'm not quite sure what they got on you, but somebody at headquarters is taking a sudden interest in this place. What's going on, Billy? What's your M.O. these days? You selling horse instead of typewriters?"

Claiburne's thin mouth tightened. He resented the insult. The Quick Red Fox didn't need a sideline. He was a specialist in crime, a celebrity, although a minor one, his last important press notice having appeared in the *Daily News* following theft number 303 only a few months ago. Stealing typewriters was his life, his fulfillment. Bats called it crazy, but it had grossed C&M $100,000 in five years. With a touch of fame and that kind of revenue, what more could a dropout from P.S. 167 ask?

"I'm not in any other line of work, Sergeant," said The Quick

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Red Fox with more restraint than he felt. "At my work I'm the best there is. I won't be caught."

"I caught you once," McSween said with tactless pride.

"You didn't catch me, you ox. You made a lucky guess on number 27, back when I was still learning the trade, and Jesse was too dumb to cover up. He's as loyal as Tonto, that Jesse, but stupid as the Great Horse Silver."

McSween blinked, poked his head from behind the glass partition, and looked toward the front door. There was no one in sight. Jesse was probably still arguing with the blind junkie about the meaning of justice as applied to a maverick typewriter. "Okay, Billy. Enough small talk. Pass me the goodies."

Claiburne pulled six ten-dollar bills from his wallet. He coughed bitterly as he counted the cash. "You may be a credit to the force, Alex, but you're a debit to me." He shoved the money into McSween's palm; the sergeant's fingers closed around it like five live sausages.

"Thanks, Billy. I appreciate the money and the kind words." His broad smile was guileless. "Remember, this little contribution buys all the help I can give you. I mean it. But watch out. I'm not the whole force. I'm not state, I'm not Federal. When I hear rumors about the brass—guys like Big Matt Garrett—talking about this place, I worry."

"I'll bet you do. You want to see that sixty-buck graft keep coming in every month, don't you?"

The sergeant's face fell like a basset hound's. He spit his chewing gum into a coffee-stained wastebasket, hardly noticing the perfection of the shot. "It's not just that, Billy. I admire you. Every guy in the city needs a little racket of his own, and you got one, a good one. Better than mine, and it takes real nerve. What was today's hit, 342?"

"341."

McSween nodded, his bourbon complexion a tinge redder than usual. "Slow down, Billy. You still need to swipe a lot of typewriters before you retire. Frisco can wait a few years for you. Right now you should take your time, take it easy. Let Garrett pick on someone else."

McSween turned and ambled toward the street, nodding at Jesse, who stood modestly victorious in the center aisle of the store, swaying under the weight of Number 341.

At one minute before three o'clock Bats Masterson, always on

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schedule, roared into the store like a Kansas whirlwind, alternately puffing on a cheroot and gobbling a hot dog. "Where's Billy?" he shouted. "Goofing off?" Claiburne stepped out of his cubicle. "Oh, there you are, pardner. How'd it go?"

"No problems."

"An Executive?"

"What else? Practically new."

"We need two more," Bats snapped. "The order is for five. Ike Brocius gets restless."

"I know. I know. By the end of the week, Bats. I'll have them by then. This damn pressure for delivery is getting me down. It didn't used to be like this."

"Tough." Masterson fingered his black handlebar mustache. A tall sallow hombre in his late thirties, he dressed mod: a black velvet shirt, gold string necktie, tailored fuchsia suit with wide bell-bottoms, and low Western-style boots. "It's chicken feed," he muttered. "Five used Executives. The real money's in Mt. Kisco, in my end of the business, in new typewriters. Even the kids out of secretarial school have to have a new machine."

"Any problems in Kisco?"

"Any problems?" Bats snorted. "With an operation like mine there's always problems. No stability any more, Billy. You set the whole thing up, you put an outlaw production gang together, and, zap, it starts falling apart. Stolen parts are cheap but chancy. They fired Jake Clanton from the plant last Friday, my only key molder, the veteran of the force. They caught him with a lunchbox full of *m*'s and commas, the nincompoop. That kind of stuff went out with boop-boop-a-doop. I was trying to line up a replacement for him last night. You can't build typewriters without keys, pal, and I'm missing enough *m*'s and commas to print the Sunday *Times*. Every other part I've got.

"So what do I find in Kisco? A dozen Mr. Cleans at the plant. Key-nabbers are harder to get than platen-grabbers. All four guys on the day shift are straight arrows. No hope. One kid on the swing shift seemed like a good bet though, so I bought him a few beers at Vince's. Turns out he's an ex-con who's going straight until the right deal comes along. He served five-to-ten for art theft, so he's not about to settle for nickel-and-dime stuff. He won't lift keys and I don't blame him. It would be a hell of a drop from Paul Klees to typewriter keys."

"So?"

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"So Vince tells me he knows a man who knows a man from Troy, upstate. This man from Troy just got canned for waltzing off with TV picture tubes from GE. But he's smart, or so Vince says. Just unlucky. The plant will probably hire him if we can get him to Westchester on time. I'm going back tonight to talk to him. I've got forty thousand parts sitting up there in Apartment 7-E waiting for assembly. No *m*'s, no commas, but, hell, I've got more nylon gears than the plant ever had at one time."

"What about Clanton? Are we going to put him on the C&M payroll?"

Masterson shook his head. "No way. He's got as much mechanical ability as a coyote. Besides, we need keys, not labor. We've got to get a parts flow going, Billy. I've hired too many assemblers already. They're sitting around the apartment up there, drinking beer, watching TV, and drawing their salaries. No repair business to speak of. The lazy creeps."

"Oh, by the way," Claiburne said, "McSween was in. I gave him the April green. But get this, he told me we might be in for trouble—says that someone at headquarters is onto this place. Says we should watch out."

Bats glared, his temper rising quickly, visibly, like a Great Plains tornado. He held himself in check for a moment, then came out with a blast. It was predictable. Billy knew how Bats felt about Alex McSween and The Quick Red Fox and the low-grossing used-typewriter business. "*You* should watch out, you and your used typewriters, hand-signed poems, payoff money, and only fourteen percent of the C&M income. Damn it, Billy, I'm a businessman, a manufacturer, not a two-bit criminal conspirator. I make typewriters by the hundreds. I'm a builder, an empire builder. But you—you're just—you're just a bandit, a wheezing, kooky, small-time bandit. How you ever got away with 337—"

"341 today. And without a hitch. Remember, Bats," he said stiffly, "I'm the man who put this outfit together. It's C&M, not M&C."

"It's Bats that built the business," said Masterson with a fine sense of alliteration. "*I* found *you*, pal, not the other way around. I thought you were an honest but greedy merchant, a good outlet for homemade typewriters. Ha! Wrong on one of two counts. You're crooked as a sidewinder. But now you're rich, and it was the Mt. Kisco operation that put both of us into six figures You know that. Don't blow it on petty larceny."

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"It's not petty—"

"Just a figure of speech, Billy. I know it's grand larceny, twenty thousand a year, all profit. I have to pay my suppliers and assemblers. But watch out. McSween's a buddy of yours, he'll look out for you. But he's never had to warn you before. He thinks you're some kind of struggling artist in crime, an attic Rembrandt. He should see your bank account."

"He should see yours."

"Well, he expects it of me. He thinks I'm a solid Establishment businessman," Bats said, flicking a hint of lint from his midnight shirt and adjusting a huge emerald on his ring finger. "Which is good. I want you to keep it that way, Billy. Pick your targets."

"I always do."

"Pick 'em better. Slow down. Forget about the machines for Brocius if you have to. I'll tell him you had an attack of arthritis."

"Not necessary. I'll get two more IBM's without any sweat. One in Bridgeport, Connecticut, on Wednesday. The other in Livingston, New Jersey on Friday. Not even Matt Garrett can stop me short of 500. I'll be retired to Frisco within three years. After that the whole business is yours, new and used. You can count on it."

"Yeah, maybe," Masterson said, brushing an imaginary spot of dust from his gaudy sleeve. "Look, I've got a few phone calls to make, and then I'm going to hit the trail for Westchester. See you tomorrow."

Billy Claiburne returned slowly to his cubicle, pondering. How could the police—how could Big Matt Garrett—know anything about the identity of The Quick Red Fox? Claiburne had never been fingerprinted. There had been no photographs taken of him within the last five years. He used a galaxy of aliases: Clyde Older, Hank Galton, James Frank, N. E. Oakley, John Wesley Bass. He was cautious, always cautious. Except for Bats Masterson, Jesse Plummer, Alex McSween, and maybe the blind junkie on the corner, no one knew who the thin shadowy typewriter rustler was.

Why, then, would Garrett be concerned with C&M? What could he know about The Quick Red Fox? Matt Garrett, a young lantern-jawed prosecutor from upstate, a hot-shot lawyer, had recently been named the Governor's new super-D.A. for the five boroughs of New York. He was supposed to be cleaning up organized crime, including organized crime among the five D.A. offices. But mainly he was after the syndicate, the Big Boys whose

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careers ended in automobile trunks. He wouldn't be likely to concern himself with a one-at-a-time typewriter thief.

So then, could the police be onto Bats's operation in Mt. Kisco? Now there was a thought. Was it possible that Masterson's typewriter-building enterprise was the real target? Not Billy's small-scale peccadillos but Bats's large-scale ripoffs? Had the clever organizer, Bernard Aaron Theodore Sheldon Masterson, the mastermind, somehow managed to slip up? Could it be that this flamboyant cottage-industry tycoon, this ex-typewriter foreman, now self-employed in Apartment 7-E, was under surveillance? No. Not a chance. The man was a pro.

Claiburne knew, with a cynicism born of observation, that criminals of Bats's magnitude, the Mr. Bigs of Big Town, the Large Worms in the Big Apple, were always sought but never caught. It was the independents, the unconnected, the sly but vulnerable foxes who ended up in the Tombs. He figured Alex McSween must have said or done something to give him away. Never trust a cop, even a crooked one. Drat and double drat.

Quitting time came at six P.M. and Claiburne stepped out the front door into the eye-searing smog of an April evening. Outside he heard a voice call softly, "Hey, Fox." He looked around. It wasn't Bats, it might be McSween, but he wasn't taking any chances. No one was in sight.

As he started to trot toward his car, a voice behind him—it didn't sound like McSween's—yelled in an urgent stage whisper, "Hey, Quick Fox, you dope. I've got a note from the Dumb Ox."

It was the blind junkie's voice. Billy kept going.

Shivering, he jumped into the driver's seat, snapped on the ignition, and raced off in a cloud of debris.

What was going on? "Hey, Fox . . . Quick Fox." A message from McSween through the blind junkie? Incredible. Was his ordered life, his careful routine, about to fall apart? He didn't like the way things looked.

Did he dare go to his apartment? Not at the moment he didn't. For an hour he drove aimlessly around lower Manhattan, fuming, quaking. Houston Street never looked drearier. At 7:05 he flipped the wheel toward the East Side, 63rd Street off the park. Why not? He had nowhere else to go.

Billy's imperious doorman, Loomis, the most superficially distinguished man in the apartment building despite his lack of a first name, handled the car through a junior partner. Billy handled

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the self-service elevator himself, but not before looking hard into the convex metal mirror.

Claiburne's studio apartment, richly furnished in rosewood and cowhide, glowed a serene welcome. He was home, safe for the moment, ready to relax in the only place in the world that meant anything to him. Despite all his talk of Frisco, this one-room studio was his permanent home, his only possible home. He loved it as he had loved little else in his 45 years.

This apartment, plus his growing list of typewriter thefts, represented the whole of reality to him. His bold robber-baron dreams of childhood had faded, contracted, narrowed to two small passions: a chromium room in Manhattan and a glittering goal of 500 typewriters. Both were vital to his existence. Everything else was dross.

Here above 63rd Street he could live quietly, obliquely. He could enjoy his vast collection of stereo tapes in total seclusion. He could peer out toward Central Park and see a thousand faceless specimens of humanity, contaminated with their silly, insoluble problems, scurrying below him like insects in a bell jar. A wall of glass protected him.

He crossed the rya carpet, lifted an Orrfors tumbler from the wall-hung bar, and poured a double shot of Scotch. He selected a Tex Ritter tape from his shelf of country-and-western favorites. As he started to flip the switch on his stereo set, the telephone began to ring. Strange. No one should be calling.

He drank the Scotch suddenly, at a gulp. A shudder, a wheezing cough swept his narrow frame, and a thin frightened face, his own image in gray parchment, looked back at him from the mirror over the fireplace.

He walked toward the phone like a wary Dodge City gunman at sundown. He lifted the receiver off the hook on the fourth ring. A woman's cheery voice trilled through the earpiece. "Hello, Western Union calling. Is this Mr. Billy Claiburne?"

"Yes, it is."

"I have a telegram for you, Mr. Claiburne."

"Yes?"

"It's from a Mr. O. K. Earp of Long Island City."

"Never heard of him, miss. I'm sorry."

"Well, he's heard of you, and he's sent you a telegram. A very weird telegram, if you know what I mean."

"I don't know what you mean." Billy wanted to hang up.

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"Well, I mean, it's like a singing telegram. Only it's a poem."

"A poem?"

"So help me, Mr. Claiburne, it's a poem, and Mr. Earp said to read it like a poem. So here goes:"

She cleared her throat, waited for an interruption but got none. She delivered the lyric in a voice that sounded solemn, determined, and vaguely puzzled:

Bats got busted in Mt. Kisco,
The man from Troy was Garrett's bait.
My junkie missed you, head for Frisco,
Three-four-two will have to wait.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Adventure in Televisionland by

R. R. IRVINE

Niles Brundage was the actor who played the role of Sherlock Holmes in the newest TV series, and he played it with a lilt. In fact, Niles Brundage became *The Master Detective . . . an appetizer for Sherlockian aficionados and a hearty entree for mystery fans—not at all, as "Dr. Watson" remarks in the story, "an hors d'oeuvre at a smorgasbord for lunatics" . . .*

ANOTHER CASE OF IDENTITY

by R. R. IRVINE

"Come, Watson, come! The game is afoot!" With those words Sherlock Holmes, wearing a flap-eared traveling cap, hurried past me.

"Tape is stopped!" shouted the stage manager.

We stood poised, waiting for the director's verdict. Finally his disembodied voice boomed over the talk-back. "That's a take, gentlemen. We'll break for the next scene."

Sherlock Holmes disappeared into his dressing room.

Still feeling like Dr. John Watson, I stepped to one side as our bullet-pocked wall, made famous in the stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, dollied past, followed by the equally renowned wooden mantelpiece. A moment later the coal shuttle which held Holmes's cigars swung by in the hands of an ancient prop-man. 221B Baker Street had disappeared, replaced by a London exterior complete with billowing, dry-ice fog.

The high-pitched, garbled flutter of rewinding audio tape preceded the sound of a hansom cab. To the accompaniment of clopping horses Sherlock Holmes—Niles Brundage, actually—exited flamboyantly from his dressing room.

"Ah, Watson," he said, clapping me on the back. "This is turning out to be quite an adventure, isn't it?"

Ever since *Dark Shadows* had taken over the late-after-

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noon ratings with its vampires and ghouls, Channel Three had tried game shows, old movies, and even cartoons in a futile attempt to compete. Finally, our show, *The Newest Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, had brought a modicum of success. But even after eleven weeks of sleuthing, Barnabas Collins, the undying vampire hero of *Shadows*, seemed forever beyond the reach of Conan Doyle's immortal detective.

"Brundage, we're not taping," I said, "so you can drop the Holmes-Watson bit."

He looked at me as if I were utterly mad.

"My dear fellow," he said with a derogatory sniff. Then, with a sudden squint, he seemed to forget my admonition. "Watson, keep an eye on Inspector Lestrade. He's been filching my tobacco again."

Here we go, I thought. They'd been at it ever since the show began, squabbling over tobacco from our authentic-looking prop humidor. The rivalry had become so intense, in fact, that each morning they raced onto the stage to see who could fill his tobacco pouch first. On this particular morning, Brundage had won. Lestrade—actor Jay Wallace—had for some reason arrived on the set quite late.

"Yesterday I caught him taking two pouchfuls," Brundage complained. "Imagine, a Scotland Yard man acting like that. The man's a menace!"

The director gave us a "stand-by" signal.

Side by side we waited on the cardboard curb.

"Tape is rolling," said the stage manager, his voice already weary.

We stepped into a mock-up of a hansom cab.

"Charing Cross, my good man," Brundage-Holmes said to a nonexistent driver.

While prop-men rocked the cab and the streets of London flashed by in rear-projection, my companion sat deep in thought, his chin sunk on his chest, just as the script called for. The camera pulled back for a scene fade-out.

A moment later the director cut to a dimly lit interior, a dingy room somewhere in London; the door opened slowly, ominously; a shadowy silhouette stalked across camera. I watched critically. Brundage fidgeted at my side, always restless when someone else held the spotlight.

The director brought up the klieg lights. The shadow became an evil, laughing face—the face of the mastermind of crime, Professor Moriarty. To emphasize his evil purpose there was a slow zoom to the box which he

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carried under one arm. A thunderous chord of organ music accompanied the shot.

The script called for Moriarty to set a trap for Holmes. The box, therefore, held a deadly viper—a remarkable rubber replica, I might add.

Moriarty opened the box. The camera dollied in for a close-up of the snake as the master criminal—in reality, actor Les Peters—fondled the reptile. Then Moriarty crossed to a table which held Holmes's humidor. He opened the container and put the snake inside, and that made two. A look of complete surprise, tinged with horrified fascination, flushed across his face as the second snake curled back and struck him on the wrist. Moriarty-Peters staggered against the balsa-wood table.

"Cut!" the stage manager yelled as the actor crumpled to the floor.

Brundage and I jumped from the hansom and hurried to the fallen actor. Brundage, still immersed in the role of Sherlock Holmes, felt for a pulse, though I suspected he wouldn't have known what to do if he had found one.

"You may as well have a look at him, Watson," he said, "though I fear it's already too late for your medical skills."

I knelt on the cobblestone linoleum. "He's still alive. Someone call an ambulance!"

"And the police," Brundage added, eyeing Les Peters as though he were trying to steal a scene. Then Brundage stepped to the table and cautiously peered into the humidor. "The Speckled Band," he muttered and called me over. As soon as I had a look he clapped a lid on the snake.

"How did that get in here?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

"Elementary, Watson, elementary!" He strolled over to what remained of our drawing room and fell onto his sofa. A moment later his face was half hidden in smoke from his famous clay pipe.

While Brundage watched with an amused smile, our crew gathered around the unconscious man, whose breathing began to rattle forlornly.

A pair of ancient prop-men, both years beyond heavy work, argued.

"Should we move him or wait for the ambulance?" one said.

The other, the shop steward, shook his head. "This could be a jurisdictional matter. I'm not sure which union is allowed to move bodies."

"I don't think he's considered a prop," said the first, pointing his nose at Peters.

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I hoped they were joking.

An equally ancient gaffer seemed about to prod the stricken man, then thought better of it, and began to poke at the klieg lights with his long wooden rod. Our cameraman zoomed in on the crowd, then rolled between two bit-players to get a close-up of Peters' bluish face. The boys in the control room must have been getting an eyeful in 21-inch color.

Two nurse-actresses from the *Emergency Hospital* set next door offered diagnoses.

I gulped a sharp-edged swallow to keep down my breakfast and went over to join Brundage on the sofa. But he stayed where he was, stretched out on his back, smoking; and I stood by stupidly, looking for a place to sit down.

"Obviously, Watson, that snake was meant for me. Yes, indeed." He nodded slowly. "Someone wants Sherlock Holmes out of the way."

As Dr. John Watson I nodded; as Bill Aldrich, actor, I shook my head in disbelief. "But—" I stammered. "It was Les Peters who was bitten."

"Ah, yes, poor Moriarty. Obviously just an unfortunate mistake. Who would want to kill him when there's more tempting game to be stalked—me?"

"Who would want to kill you, Brundage?"

"The question is, who would want to kill Sherlock Holmes, and the answer to that is absurdly commonplace. Proving it, however, may be another matter."

"Sherlock Holmes is dead," I said.

"Sherlock Holmes will never die," boomed Brundage, "as long as there are great actors like me."

My exasperation grew. "All right then, who would want to kill Sherlock Holmes?"

"When you eliminate the possible and all you have left is the impossible, then that must be the truth." Brundage's idea of humor was incredible.

"You mean you've *solved* the crime?"

"Bravo, Watson. Yes—just the details remain to be filled in."

There's an old saw about actors living their parts. But Niles Brundage carried it to the point of mania.

Like an aromatic specter, a cloud of smoke from his pipe trailed him everywhere, on and off stage. On the street, even at lunch in the studio dining room, he wore the deerstalker hat like a badge of office.

To Niles Brundage I had lost my identity. I was, "Watson, old fellow," or "My dear Watson," but never Bill Aldrich.

I've heard it said that insanity may be caused by a virus. If

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so, Brundage's particular strain was extremely contagious, infecting those with the least immunity. Our studio pages, for example—the young men who seated audiences, kept order during raucous game shows, and ran errands for the stars—were most susceptible. Their jobs depended on the good will of people like Brundage. And he took advantage of that fact, forming them into what he called "my Baker Street Irregulars." At his orders two pages followed him everywhere on the studio lot.

Brundage interrupted my thoughts. "Well, Watson, you may want to add this case to your annals."

Suddenly I felt the need for a second opinion on my own sanity. Indeed, maybe I was Dr. Watson! I sucked in my well-rounded stomach, trying unsuccessfully to flatten a shape that was reminiscent of the English actor, Nigel Bruce, who had played Watson in so many films. In fact, it was my resemblance to him that had got me the part.

It's been years, thank God, since I yearned to see my name in star billing. The choice had been clear cut: a life of starvation diets or happiness as a fat and sassy character actor. Anything was better than being lean and crazy like Niles Brundage.

To escape his face—which is far too handsome for Sherlock Holmes in my opinion—I pulled Hank Thatcher out of the crowd surrounding Les Peters. Thatcher, who wrote our show, was his usual half-drunk self.

"Who am I?" I asked as a pair of ambulance men rolled in a collapsible stretcher.

"Dr. Watson, I presume," Thatcher answered.

"Dead," announced one of the attendants. "No hurry now."

"What am I going to do?" Thatcher complained immediately. "My God, I'll have to write out Professor Moriarty!"

I could hardly believe it. Les Peters, alive and well this morning, dead just like that, and from a poisonous snake. It *was* something out of Sherlock Holmes.

I answered Thatcher mechanically, without really thinking. "If I remember correctly, Moriarty didn't even appear in the original story of the Speckled Band."

He smiled wanly, his arms stretched toward the heavens. Then he craned his head slowly, as if searching for the station censor, and fished a narrow silver flask from his hip pocket and swallowed furtively. As a half-hearted afterthought he offered me a snort.

"Not while I'm working."

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"That's the only time I drink," he said. After a long sigh he added, "I hate messing around with Sherlock Holmes. It seems like blasphemy." The liberties he had been forced to take in the script still rankled him. Mrs. Hudson, for example, originally an elderly and faithful housekeeper, was now a young starlet with eye-filling cleavage.

I tried to console him. "It shouldn't be so hard to edit out Moriarty."

"There may be more editing than you think, Watson," Brundage called to us as he approached holding the tobacco humidor at arm's length, one hand underneath, the other clapped over the lid. "There's murder afoot," he said with a knowing glance at the humidor. He turned to Thatcher. "Soon we may have to strike another character from our adventures."

Thatcher went to work on his flask again.

"An accident," I said. "It *must* have been an accident."

Brundage's laugh began as a low flutter, quickly worked its way up the scale like an hysterical mockingbird, and ended just as abruptly. "Watson, deadly swamp adders do not come in tobacco humidors."

I nodded. He had me there.

"Definitely murder," Brundage said with a sage nod.

"Murder! Did I hear someone say murder?" Our own Lestrade of Scotland Yard, Jay Wallace, joined us. An English actor who had played Sherlock Holmes on the London stage, Wallace had been lured to Hollywood by the Channel Three casting department, only to lose the title role to Brundage's greater sex appeal. Wallace looked like my idea of the famous detective, with facial features so sharp they seemed dangerous to the touch.

He immediately began to needle Brundage. "Maybe you need *me* to solve this crime?"

"Hardly," Brundage answered.

Wallace's mouth tapered to a knife-edged grin. "This is one mystery you can't solve, Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

Brundage clicked his tongue. "I already have." His fingers drummed on the humidor. "Ever the bungler, eh, Lestrade?"

As the two squared off I had the unshakable feeling they were about to fight over custody of the snake. But before they could come to blows, the police arrived and ordered everybody to remain on the lot until they had been questioned.

Brundage pivoted on his heels, showing his back to Wallace, and presented the humidor to a wary patrolman. Then,

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pulling me along by the arm, he stomped off the stage.

The character of Sherlock Holmes was in many ways a distinct improvement over that of Niles Brundage. I made it a rule, for example, never to eat lunch with the actor, but I would with the detective. So this time I went along with him to the executive dining room which, I fully believed, had been decorated by a sadist and featured a chef who would one day be charged with willful murder.

We joined our producer at his usual table. Much to my surprise, Brundage dropped the Holmes façade. "Where were you," he complained to the executive, "when we needed you?"

Our producer smiled indulgently.

"How the hell could a poisonous snake get on *my* set?" Brundage whined. "Criminal negligence is what I call it."

"Not at all," our producer said, dropping his smile for the first time. "I knew all about it. The snake disappeared during the taping of *Zoo Gnus* this morning. You, of all people, ought to have deduced that."

Zoo Gnus, I should explain, is Channel Three's answer to FCC requirements for creative children's programming. Each week the city zoo—free of charge, of course—provides various animals for discussion by a panel of youthful experts and their guest.

"I didn't make a formal announcement about the disappearance of the coral snake," our producer explained, "because I didn't want to start a panic."

"What you've done," Brundage declared, his eyes taking on a glint of Sherlock Holmes, "is cause a murder—and now I know just how it was done."

With an embarrassed grimace the producer's eyes scanned the dining room. "You can hardly call an accident murder," he whispered, trying to calm Brundage.

"I call it a deliberate attempt on my life. That snake was locked in a terrarium. It just didn't crawl out for a smoke."

Our producer took a long look at his watch. "Excuse me, I just remembered a meeting." He hurried from the dining room as Jay Wallace entered.

Without hesitation Wallace came straight to our table and sat down.

Brundage had changed personalities again. "Ah, Lestrade, we were just talking about you."

Wallace bowed from the waist.

"I was just explaining to Dr. Watson how the crime was com-

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mitted. You might be interested." Brundage's tone was mocking.

"I'm always interested in bad acting," Wallace answered.

Brundage ignored the remark and continued, "By all rights I should have been the one to stick his hand in that tobacco jar. I usually refill my pouch about now but I brought an extra package for myself today. The criminal just had bad luck." He glared at Wallace.

"What we need around here is a real Sherlock Holmes," announced Wallace. He pushed to his feet and with a goodbye wave signaled that his appetite had suddenly vanished. Mine wasn't exactly hearty.

Not more than a minute later we were joined by a plain-clothes detective, and I began to feel like an hors d'oeuvre at a smorgasbord for lunatics.

The detective, a small man with precise gray hair clipped down to white-sidewalls around the ears, shook hands matter-of-factly, without a flicker of recognition. "I'm Sergeant Evans. I'm in charge of this investigation."

"You need go no further," said Brundage, obviously miffed because the man didn't fawn on him like a fan. "You're an open book to me."

The policeman gave him a quizzical look.

Brundage—though by then I felt almost compelled to call him Holmes—filled his pipe and put up a thick foul-smelling smokescreen. "I can see," he said aggressively, "that you are recently separated from your wife and have a skin allergy contracted in the Pacific."

The detective looked completely startled.

"Elementary," said Brundage. "You have a button missing from your coat, indicating that your wife has not been available to sew it on."

"Remarkable," I said. "It seems so simple after you explain it, Holmes."

"As to the allergy," my companion went on, "why else would a man wear white socks with a dark suit if it were not to combat a skin reaction to chemical dyes? Most likely contracted in the Pacific during the war."

Evans, who looked too young even for Korea, said, "I'll question you two later," and then left shaking his head.

Holmes and I got back to the set just as a gang of prop-men, quarrelsome as wind-blown sparrows, rolled the interior of 221B Baker Street back into place. Holmes called over a wardrobe girl and changed into his famous dressing gown. Then, to complete the illusion, he reloaded his pipe and sur-

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rounded his head with smoke.

"Watson, are you armed?"

"Of course not."

"Ah," he said. "There may be another attempt on my life."

I suddenly realized I had been caught up in Brundage's fantasy. I shook my head but merely succeeded in bringing on a headache.

Across the set, near the mock-up of our hansom cab, Sergeant Evans launched into an animated conversation with Jay Wallace. With a squint of obvious satisfaction Brundage nodded in their direction. "Observe, my good Doctor, our two Scotland Yard terriers tugging at this case like dogs over a bone. But I'm the only one who knows where the bone is buried."

I didn't know whose egomania I was fighting, Sherlock Holmes's or Niles Brundage's. One I might have coped with, but together they overwhelmed me. To escape, I muttered something about my headache and left in search of some aspirins.

"Physician, heal thyself," he called after me.

For some reason the remark infuriated me. At that moment I wanted nothing more out of life than to solve this murder and show up the smug Mr. Sherlock Brundage.

After washing down two aspirin tablets with a double shot of Scotch, my mind cleared enough to know I needed help if I were to conduct an investigation of my own. I stepped into the narrow hall outside my dressing room and caught Jay Wallace walking by.

"Perfect," I said. "Who could be better than Lestrade of Scotland Yard?"

"Not you too," he sighed.

"Come in." I hauled him bodily into my cubbyhole and closed the door.

"I'm not sure I can take all this," Wallace said.

As reassurance I waved my bottle of Scotch under his long sharp nose. Wallace, eyes fixed on the black label, sat down with a grunt.

"I'm not that far gone yet," I said, pouring stiff drinks into plastic tumblers decorated with tricolored threes, the emblem of our channel. "I need your help."

He looked at me skeptically, then his deep-set eyes scanned my cluttered dressing room which doubled as the station's wardrobe closet. On racks next to Dr. Watson hung Sheriff Bill, Space Pirate, and the blue blazers of our news team.

As he drank I realized more than ever how much Jay Wallace looked like the original Sherlock Holmes. He swallowed the Scotch effortlessly, the only

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sign of its passing being the movement of his razor-sharp Adam's apple. Then, smacking his thin lips, he said, "Well, Watson, what's on your mind?" His humorless laugh died a muffled death in the clothes-lined room.

"Do you mind using my real name?" I snapped. "It's Bill Aldrich, remember?"

"Sorry, Bill." He held out his glass for a refill.

"Look," I said, then lowered my voice to a whisper, "Brundage has this crazy idea that someone is trying to murder him."

"Well, aren't they?"

"If it *was* murder—and I guess it has to be—why couldn't Jay Peters have been the target all along?"

With a careless gesture Wallace downed his second drink.

"I'll tell you why not," I continued. "Because Niles Brundage has an ego that demands to be the center of attention. To him no one else is worth murdering."

"Maybe he's right," Wallace said.

"You don't really believe that." When he didn't answer I went on, "Here's what I think we ought to do. We'll question everybody on the set. If anyone from our show was here this morning when they taped *Zoo Gnus*, he's our killer."

With one sentence Wallace made my plan obsolete. "Brundage was the guest expert on *Zoo Gnus* this morning," he said.

I felt light-headed when I returned to the set, converted in my absence to a London waterfront. Dry-ice fog made breathing difficult.

Niles Brundage was lounging beneath a plastic replica of a gas lamp, his flap-eared traveling cap in place, pipe clenched between his teeth. My real world disappeared in the swirling mist of television.

Sherlock Holmes said, "Ah, Watson, not a moment to be lost. Follow me." He swept from the set, leaving a foggy wake.

I staggered after him, certain that he was the murderer.

His spacious dressing room teemed with page boys, all in Channel Three uniform.

"Listen to this, Watson," he said and then gave careful instructions to his "Baker Street Irregulars."

When we were alone he said, "Well, Watson, that's how it's done—setting a trap for a murderer."

I began to doubt my sanity again. Nevertheless, I took a deep breath and blurted out, "Holmes, why didn't you tell me you were on *Zoo Gnus* this

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morning? Holmes, you're the murderer. You took the snake."

"My dear fellow," he began, shaking his head and stepping to my side to clap me on the shoulder. "Nonsense! Follow me and you'll have the real killer."

We hurried back to Baker Street. "Ah, the men from Scotland Yard. Excellent," he said to Lestrade and Sergeant Evans.

As the prop-men began to lower a London Bridge backdrop into place, Holmes announced, "Gentlemen, I've called you here to unmask a killer." He paused, head bent forward to peer first into one face and then into the other.

"What a farce," said Lestrade-Wallace to Sergeant Evans.

Holmes smiled at Lestrade. "Inspector, may I trouble you for some tobacco?" He took the pouch and then added, "It's probably mine anyway." Holmes sniffed the tobacco. "Ah, just as I suspected."

"What is it, Holmes?" I asked.

"Quite simple really. My humidor was full before we started shooting this morning. Whoever put in the snake had to take out some tobacco to make room for the viper. Lestrade, here, has a full pouch."

"Come off it," Lestrade said. "What does that prove?"

"I filled the humidor myself," Holmes continued implacably. "I expected to catch a thief—you see, I was tired of your filching—but instead I caught a murderer."

"A full pouch of tobacco doesn't prove anything." Lestrade looked to me and Evans for support.

"It proves you haven't been smoking today, for one thing. If you'd lit up from this"—Holmes pinched the pouch between his fingers—"then you'd know what I mean."

"You're crazy," said Lestrade.

"Not so crazy that I didn't get suspicious this morning when you didn't rush on the set to load up from *my* humidor."

"I was late."

"Like the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime who did nothing, you didn't either. In the dog's case it didn't bark because it knew the villain. In your case you didn't go near that humidor because you knew what it contained."

"Guesses," laughed Lestrade uneasily.

Holmes crinkled the pouch and then handed it to Evans. "Not at all. This isn't just plain tobacco. I added peppercorns and cayenne this morning. And that's what I smell in here."

Wallace's eyes went wide and

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then he bolted from the set.

"After him!" I cried.

"Don't worry," said Holmes. "My Irregulars are guarding the exits."

I stood in awe.

When a trio of "Irregulars" dragged the struggling Wallace back before us, and Sergeant Evans had taken charge of him, a confession literally spilled out. "Damn you, Brundage!" he screamed. "I should have had that part. I'm twice the Sherlock Holmes you'll ever be."

I now had my doubts about that.

"The only thing I'm sorry about," muttered Wallace, "is that I killed the wrong man."

"Poor deluded fool," said Sherlock Holmes as a policeman led the man away in handcuffs. "The English stage is one thing, Watson, television quite another. Strange, isn't it, that a man would let the promise of fame turn him into a psychopath?"

"Only one thing wrong, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," said Sergeant Evans, speaking up for the first time. "We would never have been able to get a conviction with just a little doctored tobacco as evidence. These days, with civil rights and high-powered lawyers, you need a confession, and sometimes even that isn't enough."

"Quite so," said Holmes, loading his pipe from his own pigskin pouch and then lighting up. "I was fully aware of that. That's why I extracted the confession."

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm in the right job," Sergeant Evans said with a sigh and wandered away.

"This is one case, Holmes," I said, "that I must add to my annals."

"Good old Watson," he said.

Over the studio loudspeaker our director's voice reverberated. "Stand by, gentlemen. We're retaping in two minutes."

"Come, Watson, come!" Brundage cried. "The game is afoot!"

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a *NEW* short story by

RUTH RENDELL

Geoffrey Gilmour was twice as old as Marion Craig when they became engaged, and after their marriage he seemed to feel older and older . . .

A subtle, tantalizing story whose mood grows more somber, more uneasy, more frightening, with each page . . .

THE LONG CORRIDOR OF TIME

by RUTH RENDELL

On the evening of their first day, when they had hung their pictures and unpacked their wedding presents—tasks they hadn't cared to entrust to her mother or to the moving men—they went for a walk in the square. They walked along the pavement in the September twilight, admiring the pale gleaming façades of the terraces which, now divided into flats, had once been the London residences of the very rich. Then, when they had completed their little tour and had examined all four sides of the square, Marion took his hand and led him toward the wilderness of trees and shrubs which formed its center.

It was a gloomy place where only the tall trees—a plane, a walnut, and a catalpa—seemed to flourish. A few attenuated rosebushes struggled for life in the shadowy corners, their wan flowers blighted with mildew. Marion put her hand on the gate in the iron railings.

"It's locked," she said.

"Of course it is, darling. It's a private garden for the tenants only. The head porter gave me our key just now."

"Do let's go in and explore it."

"If you like, but there doesn't seem much to explore."

She hesitated, holding the key he had handed her, looking through the railings at the small patchy lawn, the stone table, and the wooden seat. "No," she said. "Tomorrow will do. I *am* rather tired."

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He was touched, knowing how anxious she always was to please him. "It's hardly the sort of garden you've been used to, is it?"

She smiled but said nothing.

"Do you know, darling, I feel very guilty. I've taken you away from the country, from all your country things—your horses, the dogs—everything. And all I've given you is this."

"You didn't *take* me, Geoffrey. I came of my own free will."

"Hmm. I wonder how much free will we really have. If you hadn't met me, you'd be at the university now—you'd have your own friends, young people. I'm twice your age."

"Oh, no," she said seriously as they walked back to the terrace where their flat was. "I'll be eighteen next week. You were twice my age when we got engaged and I was seventeen and five months. Exactly twice. I worked it out to the day."

He smiled. The head porter came out, holding the door open for them. "Good night, madam. Good night, sir."

"Good night," said Geoffrey. So she had worked it out to the day. The earnest accuracy of this, a sort of futile playfulness, seemed to him entirely characteristic of the childhood she hadn't quite left behind. Only five or six years ago perhaps she had been writing, with comparable precision, inside exercise books: *Marion Craig*, *The Mill House*, *Sapley*, *Sussex*, *England*, *Europe*, *The World*, *The Universe*. And now she was his wife.

"He called me madam," she said as they went up in the elevator. "No one ever did that before." With his arm round her and her head on his shoulder she said, "You'll never be twice my age again, darling. That isn't mathematically possible."

"I know that, my love. You've no idea," he said, laughing, "what a tremendous comfort that is."

It wasn't true, of course, that he had given her nothing but a dusty scrap of London shrubbery to compensate for the loss of The Mill House. He asked himself which of her friends, those schoolgirls who had been her bridesmaids, could expect even in five years' time a husband who was a partner in a firm of stockbrokers, a five-room flat in nearly the smartest part of London, a car of her own parked in the square next to her husband's Jaguar, and a painting for her drawing-room wall that was almost certainly a Sisley.

And he wouldn't stand in her way, he thought as he looked in his bedroom glass

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before leaving for work, scrutinizing his dark head for those first silver hairs. She could still ride, still have parties for people her own age. And he would give her everything she wanted.

He glanced down at the fair head on the pillow. She was still asleep and on her skin lay the delicate bloom of childhood, a patina that is lighter and more evanescent than dew and is gone by twenty. He kissed her tenderly on the side of her folded lips.

"It bothers me a bit," he said to Philip Sarson who came out as he was unlocking his car. "What is Marion going to do with herself all day? We don't know anyone here but you."

"Oh, go shopping, go to the cinema," said Philip airily. "When I suggested you take the flat I thought how handy the West End would be. Besides, married women soon find their hands full."

"If you mean kids, we don't mean to have any for years yet. She's so *young*. God, you do talk like a Victorian sometimes."

"Well, it's my period. I'm steeped in it."

Geoffrey got into his car. "How's the new book coming?"

"Gone off to my publisher. Come round tonight and I'll read you some bits?"

"No, you come to see us," said Geoffrey, trying to sound enthusiastic. A jolly evening for Marion, he thought, a merry end to the day for an eighteen-year-old—coffee and brandy with a tired stockbroker of 35 and an historian of 45. He would ask her first thing he got back what she thought about it and if there were the least hesitancy in her manner, he would phone Philip and put him off.

"But I'd like to see him," she said. "I love hearing about Victorian London. Stop worrying about me."

"I expect I shall when we've settled in. What did you do today?"

"I went to Harrods and matched the stuff for the dining-room curtains and I arranged for my driving lessons. Oh, and I explored the garden."

"The garden? Oh, that bit of jungle in the middle of the square."

"Don't be so disparaging. It's a dear little garden. There are some lovely old trees and one of the porters told me they actually get squirrels in there. It's been such a hot day and it was so quiet and peaceful sitting on the seat in the shade."

"Quiet and peaceful!" he said.

She linked her arm through his and touched his cheek with one gentle finger. "I don't want

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to be a gadabout all the time, Geoffrey, and I've never been very wild. Don't you like me the way I am?"

He put his arms round her, emotion almost choking him. "I love everything about you. I must be the luckiest man in London."

"I know exactly what you mean," said Philip when, two hours later, Marion resumed her praises of the garden. "It *is* peaceful. I used to sit out there a lot last summer, working on my book, *Great-Grandfather's London*. I've passed many a happy hour in that garden."

"Yes, but you're practically a great-grandfather yourself," Geoffrey retorted. "I want Marion to go out with her contemporaries."

"Very few of her contemporaries can afford to live in Palomede Square, Geoff. But I'm glad you like it, Marion. I'm thinking of writing a book about the square itself. I've unearthed some fascinating stories and a lot of famous people have lived here." Philip named a poet, an explorer, and a statesman. "These houses were built in 1840 and I think that a hundred and thirty years of comings and goings ought to make a good read."

"I'd like to hear some of those stories one day," said Marion. In her long black skirt she looked like a schoolgirl dressed up for charades. She must get out and buy clothes, Geoffrey thought, spend a lot of money. He could afford it.

Philip had begun to read from his manuscript and during the pauses, while Marion asked questions, Geoffrey thought—perhaps because they had all been mentally transported back more than 100 years—of those Victorian dresses which were once more so fashionable for the very young. He imagined Marion in one of them, a ruched and flounced gown with a high, boned collar and long puff sleeves. In his mind's eye he saw her as a reincarnation of a Nineteenth Century ingenue crossing the square, her blonde hair combed high, walking with delicate tread toward the garden.

Smiling at Philip, nodding to show he was still listening, he got up to draw the curtains. But before he pulled the cords, he looked out beyond the balcony to the empty square below with its lemony spots of lamplight and its neglected, leafy, umbrageous center. Between the canopy of the ilex and the dusty yellow-spotted laurel he made out the shape of the stone table and, beside it, the seat that looked as if it had never been occupied.

The corners of the garden

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were now deep caverns of shadow and nothing moved but a single leaf which, blown prematurely from the plane tree, scuttered across the sour green turf like some distracted insect.

He pulled the curtain cords sharply, wondering why he suddenly felt, in the company of his loved wife and his old friend, so ill at ease.

"How was your driving lesson, darling?"

"It was nice," she said, smiling up at him with a kind of gleeful pride. "He said I was very good. When I came back I sat in the garden learning the Highway Code."

"Why not sit on the balcony? If I'd been at home today I'd have sunbathed all afternoon on that balcony."

She said naively, "I do wish you could be home all day," and then, as if feeling her way with caution, "I like the garden best."

"But you don't get any light there at all. It must be the gloomiest hole in London. As far as I can see, no one else uses it."

"I'll sit on the balcony if you want me to, Geoffrey. I won't go in the garden if it upsets you."

"*Upsets* me? What an extraordinary word to use! Of course it doesn't *upset* me. But the summer's nearly over and you might as well make the best of what's left."

While they had been speaking, standing by the windows which were open onto the balcony, she had been holding his arm. But he felt its warm pressure relax and when he looked down at her he saw that her face now had a vague and distant look, a look that was both remote and secretive, and her gaze had traveled beyond the balcony rail to the motionless treetops below.

For the first time since their wedding he felt rejected, left out of her thoughts. He took her face in his hand and kissed her lips.

"You look so beautiful in that dress—sprigged muslin, isn't it?—like a Jane Austen girl going to her first ball. You didn't wear that for your driving lesson?"

"No, I changed when I came in. I wanted to put it on before I went into the garden. Wasn't that funny? I just had this feeling I ought to wear it for the garden."

"I hoped," he said, "you were wearing it for me."

"Oh, darling," she said, and now he felt that she was with him once more, "I can understand it upsets you when I go into the garden. I *quite* understand. I know it could affect

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some people like that. Isn't it strange that I know? But I won't go there again."

He didn't know what she meant or why his simple distaste for the place—a reasonable dislike that was apparently shared by the other tenants—should call for understanding. But he loved her too much to bother with it, and the vague unease he felt passed when she told him she had telephoned one of her bridesmaid friends and been invited to a gathering of young people. It gratified him that she was beginning to make a life of her own, planning to attend with this friend a course of classes. He took her out to dinner, proud of her in her flounced lilac muslin, exultant at the admiring glances she drew.

But he awoke in the night to strange terrors which he couldn't at first define. She lay with one arm about his shoulders but he shook it off almost roughly and went quickly to get a glass of water as if, distressingly, mystifyingly, he must get away from her for a moment at all costs.

Sitting in the half-dark drawing room, he tried to analyze this night fear and came up with one short sentence: I am jealous. Never in his life had he been jealous before and the notion of jealousy had never touched their marriage. But now in the night, without cause, as the result of some forgotten dream perhaps, he was jealous. She was going to a party of young people, to classes with young people. Why had he never before considered that some of those contemporaries whom he encouraged her to associate with would necessarily be young men? And how could he, though rich, successful, though still young in a way, compete with a youth of twenty?

A sudden impulse came to him to draw back the curtains and look down into the garden, but he checked it and went back to bed. As he felt her, warm and loving beside him, his fears went and he slept.

"That's a very young chap teaching Marion to drive," said Philip who worked at home all day, gossiped with the porters and knew everything that went on. "He doesn't look any older than she."

"Really? She didn't say."

"Why should she? He won't seem young to her."

Geoffrey went up the steps. He had forgotten his key.

"Is my wife in, Jim?" he said to the head porter. "If not you'll have to open up for me."

"Mrs. Gilmour is in the garden, sir."

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"In the *garden?*"

"Yes, sir. Madam's spent every day this week in the garden. The gardener's no end pleased about it, I can tell you. He said to me only this morning, 'The young lady'—no disrespect, sir, but he called her the young lady—'really appreciates my garden, more than some others I could name.' "

"I don't get it," said Geoffrey as he and Philip went down into the square. "I really don't. She promised me she wouldn't go there again. I honestly do think she might keep the first promise she's made to me. It's a bit bloody much."

Philip looked curiously at him. "Promised you she wouldn't go into the garden? Why shouldn't she?"

"Because I told her not to, that's why."

"My dear old Geoff, don't get so angry. What's come over you? I've never known you to get into such a state over a trifle."

Through clenched teeth Geoffrey said, "I am not accustomed to being disobeyed," but even as he spoke, as the alien words were ground out and Philip stood still, thunderstruck, he felt the anger that had overcome him without any apparent will of his own seep away, and he laughed rather awkwardly. "God, what a stupid thing to say! Marion!" he called. "I'm home."

She had been sitting on the seat, a book on the table in front of her. But she hadn't been reading it, for although it was open, the pages were fast becoming covered with fallen leaves. She turned a bemused face toward him, blank, almost hypnotized; but suddenly she seemed to regain consciousness. She picked up her book, scattered the leaves, and ran toward the gate.

"I shouldn't have gone into the garden," she said. "I didn't mean to but it looked so lovely and I couldn't resist. Wasn't it funny that I couldn't resist?"

He had meant to be gentle and loving, to tell her she was always free to do as she pleased. The idea that he might ever become paternalistic, let alone autocratic, horrified him. But how could she talk of being unable to resist as if there were something tempting about that drab autumnal place?

"I really don't follow you," he said. "It's a mystery to me." If tempered with a laugh, if accompanied by a squeeze of her hand, his words would have been harmless. But he heard them ring coldly and—worse—he felt glad his reproof had gone home, satisfied that she looked hurt and a little cowed.

She sighed, giving the garden

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a backward glance in which there was something of yearning, something—was he imagining it?—of deceit. He took her arm firmly, trying to think of something that would clear the cloud from her face, but all that came out was a rather sharp, "Don't let's hang about here. We're due at my cousin's in an hour."

She nodded compliantly. Instead of feeling remorse, he was irritated by the very quality that had captivated him, her childlike naïveté. A deep and sullen depression enclosed him, and while they were at his cousin's party he spoke roughly to her once or twice, annoyed because she sat silent and then, illogically, even more out of temper when she was stirred into a faint animation by the attentions of a boy her own age.

From that evening onward he found himself beginning to look for faults in her. Had she always been so vague, so dreamy? Had that idleness, that forgetfulness, always been there? She had ceased to speak of the garden. All those jaded leaves had fallen. The thready plane twigs hung bare, the evergreens had dulled to blackness, and often in the mornings the stone table, the seat, and the circle of grass were rimed with frost. The nights drew in at four o'clock and it was far too cold to sit in the open air.

Yet when he phoned his home from his office, as he had increasingly begun to do in the afternoons, he seldom received a reply. Nothing had come of that plan to go to classes and she said she never saw her friend. Where, then, was she when he phoned?

She couldn't be having daily driving lessons, each one lasting for hours. He might have asked her but he didn't. He brooded instead on her absences and his suppressed resentment burst into flames when there was no dinner prepared for their guests.

"They'll be here in three-quarters of an hour!" He had never shouted at her before and she put up her hand to her lips, shrinking away from him.

"Geoffrey, I don't know what happened to me but I forgot. Please forgive me. Can't we take them out?"

"People will begin to think I've married some sort of crazy child. What about last week when you 'forgot' that reception, when you 'forgot' to write and thank my cousin after we'd dined there?"

She had begun to cry.

"All right," he said harshly, "we'll take them to a restaurant. Haven't much choice, have we? For God's sake, get out of that bloody dress!"

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She was again wearing the lilac muslin. Evening after evening when he got home he found her in it—the dress he had adored but which was now worn and crumpled, with a food spot at the waist.

He poured himself a stiff drink. He was shaking with anger. The arguments in her favor he had put forward when she forgot the reception—that there had been a dozen gatherings which she hadn't forgotten but had graced—now seemed invalid in the face of this neglect.

But when she came back into the room his rage went. She wore a dress he hadn't seen before, of scarlet silk, stiff and formal yet suited to her youth, with huge sleeves, a tight black and gold embroidered bodice, and long skirt. Her hair was piled high and she walked with an unfamiliar aloofness that was almost hauteur.

His rage went, to be replaced oddly and rather horribly by an emotion he hadn't supposed he would ever feel toward her—a kind of greedy lust. He started forward, slopping his drink.

"Damme, Isabella, but you're a fine woman!"

Incredulously, she stopped and stood still. "*What* did you say?"

He passed his hand across his brow. "I said, 'God, Marion, you're a lovely girl.' "

"I must have misheard you. I really thought. . . I feel so strange, Geoffrey, not myself at all sometimes and you're not you. You do still love me?"

"Of course I love you. Kiss? That's better. My darling little Marion, don't look so sad, We'll have a nice evening and forget all about this. Right?"

She nodded but her smile was watery, and the next day when he phoned her at three there was no reply although she had told him her driving lesson was in the morning.

Philip looked very comfortable and at home in the armchair by the window, as if he had been there for hours. Perhaps he had. Was it possible that she was out with him, Geoffrey wondered, on all those occasions when he phoned and got no answer?

The dress he had come to hate was stained with mud at the hem as if she had been walking. Her shoes were damp and her hair untidy. Maybe she devoted her mornings to the "very young chap" and her afternoons to this much older one. The husband, he had always heard, was the last to know.

She sat down beside him on the sofa, very close, almost huddled with him. Geoffrey moved slightly aside. What had hap-

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pened to her gracious ways, that virginal aloofness, which had so taken him when he first saw her in her father's house? And he recalled, while Philip began on some tedious story of Palomede before the square was built, how he had ridden over to Cranstock to call on her father and she had been there with her mother in the drawing room, the gray-brown head and the smooth fair one bent over their work. At a word from her father she had risen, laying aside the embroidery frame, and played to them—oh, so sweetly!—on the harpsichord. . .

He shook himself, sat upright. God, he must have been more tired than he had thought and had actually dozed off. When had she ever done embroidery or played to him anything but records? And where had he got the name Cranstock from? The Craigs lived in Sapley and her father was dead.

The brief dream had been rather unpleasant. He said sharply, "Anyone want a drink?"

"Nothing for me," said Philip.

"Sherry, darling," said Marion. "Did you say a *manor* house, Philip?"

"Remember all these inner suburbs were villages in the early part of the Nineteenth Century, my dear. The Hewsons were lords of the manor of Palomede until the last one sold the estate in 1838."

His ill temper welling, Geoffrey brought their drinks. What right had that fellow to call *his* wife "my dear," and who cared, he thought, returning to catch Philip's words, if some Hewson had been a minor poet or another had held office in Lord Liverpool's government?

"The last one murdered his wife."

"In that garden," said Geoffrey rather nastily, "and they took him up the road to Tyburn and hanged him."

"No, he was never brought to trial, but there was a good deal of talk and he was never again received in society. He married a wife half his age and suspected her of infidelity. She wasn't quite sane—what we'd now call mentally disturbed—and she used to spend hours wandering in the manor gardens. They extended over the whole of this square, of course, and beyond. He accused her of having trysts there with her lovers. All imagination, of course—there was no foundation for it."

Geoffrey said violently, "How can you possibly know that? How can *you* know there was no foundation?"

"My dear Geoff! Because the young lady's diary happens to

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have come into my hands from a great-niece of hers."

"I wouldn't believe a word of it!"

"Possibly not, but you haven't read it. There's no need to get so cross."

"No, please don't, darling."

He shook off the small hand which touched his sleeve. "Be silent, Marion! You know nothing about such matters and shouldn't talk of them."

Philip half rose. He said slowly, "And you accuse *me* of being Victorian! What the hell's got into you, Geoffrey? I was simply telling Marion a tale of old Palomede and you fly into a furious temper. I think I'd better go."

"Don't go, Philip. Geoffrey's tired, that's all." Her lips trembled but she said in a steady voice, "Tell us what became of Mr. Hewson and his wife."

The historian said stiffly, "In the end he took her away to Italy where she was drowned."

"You mean *he* drowned her?"

"That's what they said. He took her out in a boat in the Bay of Naples and he came back but she didn't. After that he was blackballed in his clubs and even his own sister wouldn't speak to him."

"What God-awful romantic tripe," said Geoffrey. He was watching his wife, taking in every slatternly detail of her appearance and thinking now of the City banquet he and she were to attend in the week before Christmas. All summer during their engagement he had looked forward to this banquet, perhaps the most significant public occasion of his year, and thought how this time he would have a beautiful young wife to accompany him. But was she beautiful still? Could she, changed and waiflike and vague as she had become, hold her own in the company of those mannered and sophisticated women?

He phoned her on the afternoon of that dim December day, for she had had a slight cold in the morning, had awakened coughing, and he wanted to be sure, firstly that she was well enough to go, and secondly that she would be dressed and ready on time. But the phone rang into emptiness.

Alarmed and apprehensive, he called Philip, who was out, and then the driving school to be told that Mrs. Gilmour's instructor was out too. She couldn't be out with both of them and yet—

He got home by six. It was raining. A trail of wet footmarks led from the elevator to the door of their flat like the prints left by someone who has been called unexpectedly from

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a bath. And then, even before he saw the damp and draggled figure, still and silent in front of the balcony windows, he knew where she had been, where she had been every day.

But instead of calming his jealousy, this revelation somehow increased it and he began shouting at her, calling her a slut, a failure as a wife, and telling her he regretted their marriage.

The insults seemed to pass over her. She coughed a little. She said dully, remotely, "You must go alone. I'm not well."

"Of course you're not well, mooning your life away in that foul garden. All right, I'll go alone, but don't be surprised if I don't come back!"

Geoffrey drank more than he would have if she had been with him. A taxi brought him home to Palomede Square just after midnight and he went up in the elevator, not drunk but not quite sober either. He opened their bedroom door and saw that the bed was empty.

There were no lights on in the flat except the hall light which he had just put on himself. She had left him. He picked up the phone to dial her mother's number and then he thought, no, she wouldn't go to her mother. She would go to that driver chap or to Philip.

Philip lived in a flat in the next house. Geoffrey came down the steps into the square and was on the pavement, striding to the next doorway, when he stopped and stared into the garden. At first he thought it was only a pale tree trunk that he could see or a bundle of something dropped behind the stone table. He approached the railings slowly and clasped his hands round the cold wet iron. It was a bundle of clothes, but the clothes enwrapped the seated and utterly still figure of his wife. He began to tremble.

She wore the lilac dress, its skirt sodden with water and clinging to the shape of her legs, and over it her mink coat, soaked and spiky like a rat's pelt. She sat with her hands spread on the table, one gloved, the other bare, her face blank, wax-white, lifted to the rain which fell steadily upon her and dropped sluggishly from the naked branches.

He opened the gate and went up to her without speaking. She recoiled from him but she didn't speak either. He dragged her from the seat and brought her out of the garden and into the house, half carrying her. In the elevator she began to cough, sagging against the wall, water dripping from her hair which hung in draggles under the slackened scarf that wrapped it,

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water streaming down her face.

Heat met them as he unlocked the door of the flat. Transiently, he thought as he pushed her inside, what have we come to, we who were so happy? A drunken autocrat and a half-crazed slattern. What has come over us?

The warmth of the radiator against which she leaned made steam rise from her hair and coat. What have we come to, he thought, and then all tender wistfulness vanished, spiraling away down some long corridor of time, taking with it everything that remained of himself and leaving another in possession.

The lamp in the square lit the flat faintly with a sickly yellow radiance. He put on no lights. "I demand an explanation," he said.

"I cannot explain. I have tried to explain it to myself but I cannot." Beneath the coat which she had stripped off, over the soaked and filthy dress, she wore an ancient purple and black wool shawl, moth-eaten into holes.

"What is that repellent garment?"

She fingered it, plucking at the fringes. "It is a shawl. A shawl is a perfectly proper article of dress for a lady to wear."

Her words, her antiquated usage, brought him no astonishment. They sounded natural to his ears.

"Where did you obtain such a thing? Answer me!"

"In the market. It was pretty and I needed a shawl."

He felt his face swell with an onrush of blood. "To be more fitting for your low lover, I daresay? You need not explain why you absent yourself from my household, for I know why. You have assignations in that garden, do you not, with your paramours? With my young coachman and that scribbler fellow Sarson?"

"It is not true," she whispered.

"Do you give me the lie, Isabella? Do you know that I could have a Bill of Divorcement passed in Parliament and rid myself of you? I could keep all your fortune and send you back to your papa at Cranstock."

She came to him and fell on her knees. "Before God, Mr. Hewson, I am your honest wife! I have never betrayed you. Don't send me away, oh, don't!"

"Get up." She was clinging to him and he pushed her away. "You have disgraced yourself and me. You have committed the worst sin a woman can commit, you have neglected your duties and brought me into disrepute before my

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friends." She crept from him, leaving a trail of water drops on the carpet. "I shall think now what I must do," he said. "I want no scandal, mind. Perhaps it will be best if I remove you from this."

"Do not take me from my garden!"

"You are a married woman, Isabella, and have no rights. Pray remember it. What you wish does not signify. I am thinking of my reputation in society. Yes, to take you away may be best. Go now and get some rest. I will sleep in my dressing-room and we will tell the servants you are ill so that there may be no gossip. Come, do as I bid you."

She gathered up her wet coat and left the room, crying quietly. The lamp in the square had gone out. He searched for a candle to light him to bed but he could not find one.

Philip Sarson came into the porters' office to collect his morning paper. "A bit brighter today," he said.

"We can do with it, sir, after that rain."

"Mrs. Gilmour not out in the garden this morning?"

"They've gone away, sir. Didn't you know?"

"I haven't seen so much of them lately," said Philip. "Gone away for Christmas, d'you mean?"

"I couldn't say. Seven A.M., they went. I'd only just come on duty." The head porter looked disapproving. "Mr. Gilmour said she was ill but she could walk all right. Tried to get into the garden, she did, only he'd taken the key away from her. She got hold of the gate and he pulled her off very roughlike, I thought. It's not the sort of thing you expect in this class of property."

"Where have they gone? Do you know?"

"They took his car. Italy, I think he said. Yes, it was. I saw Naples on their luggage labels. Are you all right, sir? All of a sudden you look quite ill."

Philip made no reply. He walked down the steps, across the square, and looked through the railings into the garden. A small white glove, sodden and flat as a wet leaf, lay on the seat. He shivered, cursing the writer's imagination that led him into such strange and improbable fancies.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Major McDonlevy story by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

A deep-chuckle con-man story that would have delighted O. Henry, and, yes, Mark Twain—and who among devotees of the big con can resist that? Here is the very essence of "con"—in its pure and pristine form—involving the Game That Won the West and a marvelous "moment of truth"... Mr. Eckels, give us more exploits of Major Henry T. McDonlevy and his ingenious shenanigans...

NOBODY CAN WIN 'EM ALL

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

The small round-faced girl at the receptionist's desk just outside the railing that separated the executive offices from the rest of the bank looked up and gave me a bright professional smile. "Yes?" she said.

"My name is Thomas James," I said. "I'm supposed to meet a friend of mine here. A Major McDonlevy."

The girl's smile faded. "I don't believe—" she began dubiously.

I held my hand shoulder high. "Short," I said. "About five five and built something like a barrel on two legs."

"Oh," she said, the smile back in place, "that would be the gentleman with Mr. Andrews, Junior. Just a moment while I buzz them."

She picked up her phone with one hand and simultaneously dialed a three-digit number with the other; in a moment she spoke softly into the receiver, then set it back in its place as smoothly as she had picked it up. "You're to go right in," she said. "Third office on your left."

I gave her a smile and a wink for thanks and pushed through the swinging gate into officers' country. The entire rear wall was lined with office doors, but even without the girl's directions I would have had no difficulty locating Andrews, Junior's, because his door was

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one of three that had names printed on them in neat gilt letters. I rapped once, then went on in without waiting for a response.

They both looked up as I came in and the Major rose automatically in greeting. And after a hesitation Andrews rose too. He was a tall man with thinning fair hair, a pale undistinguished blur of a face and, in his late thirties or early forties, relatively young to be such a high-ranking bank executive—although the fact that one of those other lettered doors had borne the name Andrews, Senior may have had something to do with it.

"Ah, there you are, my boy," the Major said heartily. "Sorry to have gone off without you like that. But you know how it is with time and tide, and I see you got my message all right."

"Yes," I said.

"In your absence," the Major went on, "I took the liberty of going ahead and discussing with Mr. Andrews our interest in the old Easdale Shoe building."

"I see," I said. "And what decision did you come to?"

"Well, of course I haven't committed us to anything," the Major said. "But the property does sound extremely promising, and since Mr. Andrews has consented to drive us, I suggest we run out and take a good look at the place and then see if we can't come to a decision."

"Fine with me," I said. "I wouldn't want to inconvenience Mr. Andrews, though."

"No problem," Andrews said in a voice that tried for a hail-fellow-well-met heartiness. "Thursday afternoons are always slow. But I'd be glad to do it at any time."

I imagined he would. Because it wasn't every day that someone showed up to express an interest in acquiring a building that had lain idle since the previous owner had defaulted on his mortgage six years before. But rather than bring that up, I just smiled and said, "Offer accepted then."

"Good," Andrews said. He moved around from behind his desk. "If you'll just follow me," he said. "My car's right out back."

Andrews wasn't a fast driver. But he was a frightening one, given to swiveling his head and eyes away from the road as he talked in an attempt to include all his passengers in his conversation. As a result, he almost didn't see the gray coupe pulled off onto the narrow shoulder until it was almost too late. But his head jerked back as the Major and I cried out a warning

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in near unison, and he managed to swing the wheel away just in time to avoid a hard sideswipe.

"Damn fool," Andrews grumbled. "What's he doing parked out on the highway?"

"I think you'd better stop," the Major said.

"Why?" Andrews said, alarmed. "I didn't hit him, did I?"

"No," the Major said calmly. "But *he* is a young lady, and *she* looks as if she were in distress."

"Oh," Andrews said. "Oh." He didn't look particularly happy about it, but he did pull over to the shoulder. As soon as he stopped, I got out and walked back to where a slim girl with long blonde hair framing a round, almost doll-like face stood beside the coupe.

"Trouble?" I said.

The girl looked at me apprehensively—which wasn't an entirely unnatural or unexpected reaction since this was a lonely road and she couldn't be sure I wasn't a wolf out to add to whatever trouble she already had. Her face brightened almost immediately, though, when she saw Andrews and the Major coming up behind me.

"Oh," she exclaimed, relieved. "Mr. Andrews."

Andrews frowned and peered at her. "I don't believe—" he said slowly.

"I'm Carol Ferguson," the girl said. "And, oh, of course you don't know me, but I've seen you several times when I've come to the bank on business for Mr. Robert Horsley."

"I see," Andrews said. "That explains it then."

The Major stepped forward between them, inclining his head gravely. "Permit me to introduce myself," he said. "Major Henry T. McDonlevy, formerly the U.S. Army's and hence the world's greatest adjutant, now retired and at your service."

The girl acknowledged his half bow with a smile.

"That young gentleman over there grinning like a jackass," he went on, "is my associate, Mr. Thomas James. Think we can help the young lady, Tom?"

"We can try," I said. I spoke to Miss Ferguson. "What seems to be the trouble?"

She smiled wryly. "I'm not sure," she said. "I pulled off the road to check my map for a turnoff and the motor stalled. And I haven't been able to get it started again."

"Let's take a look," I said. I lifted the hood, bent over the motor, and sniffed. The smell of gasoline was almost overpowering. "Just as I suspected. You flooded the carburetor. Do you have a screwdriver?"

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"In the glove compartment, I think."

I got out the screwdriver, then went back to the motor and unscrewed the air filter to get at the choke underneath. Setting the filter to one side, I used the screwdriver to prop the choke closed. Then I got in behind the wheel, floored the gas pedal, and turned the ignition key. The motor ground once, then kicked over and settled down to a steady purr. I got out, retrieved the screwdriver, and replaced the air filter.

"See," I said, slamming the hood back down, "nothing to it."

Miss Ferguson clapped her hands in glee. "Oh," she cried, "I can't thank you enough. I might have been stuck here all day."

"No need to thank us at all, my dear," the Major said. "Glad to be of service."

"No," she said, sobering somewhat but still smiling. "One good turn deserves another. Do you plan to be around town very long, Major?"

"That depends on how our business goes," the Major said.

"Well," she said, "if you decide you've had enough business and want to relax for a while, you'll probably want to stop by Mr. Horsley's." She fumbled in her purse and brought out a business card which she handed to the Major. "Just show that and it'll open the way for you."

And with that she flashed me a bright "thank you" smile, got into her car, and pulled off onto the highway, giving us one last wave of her hand as she went past.

"Nice girl," the Major said, slipping the card into his breast pocket. "I'm glad we stopped to help her."

"I suppose," Andrews said.

The Major looked at him curiously. "That's an odd thing to say," he said.

"Maybe it is," Andrews said, "and I don't know anything about her personally. She does work for Mr. Horsley, though. And—well, I suppose I shouldn't talk against him since he is a depositor and his has always been a good account. But the fact of the matter is that Horsley runs a gambling den behind that restaurant of his."

"Really?" the Major said. "I didn't think gambling was legal in this state."

"It isn't," Andrews said drily. "But most of Horsley's customers are out-of-state people from across the river, and as long as there are no complaints locally, I guess the sheriff just looks the other way. Or lets himself be paid to."

"I see," the Major said.

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"Well, as Tom well knows, I try to live according to the precepts of the Good Book. And not being without sin myself, I hesitate to throw the first stone. But that's neither here nor there, I suppose. So shall we get on with the business we set out to do?"

"Just what I was going to propose myself, Major," Andrews said, and led us back to his car.

Whether as a result of the experience or not, Andrews did pay more attention to his driving and we made it the rest of the way to the building site without further incident.

The building itself was a long shedlike affair set well back from the highway on the crest of a low knoll. Unfortunately, in common with a lot of other factory buildings put up in this part of the country some 20 to 30 years ago, the lower half had been sided with corrugated metal sheeting and then left to fend for itself. It hadn't done too well. On the other hand, the upper stories were all glass—or would have been if the broken windows had been replaced. Those few that remained intact had weathered to an opaque gray that almost matched the color of the metal below.

We spent a full hour tramping around and studying the building from all angles, both outside and in. Or rather the Major did. Andrews and I both copped out early and went back to his car to wait.

"Unusual man, your friend, the Major," Andrews said.

"Yes, he is," I said. "Very unusual."

"He never did really make clear why you two were interested in this place," Andrews added casually.

I smiled. "To be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Andrews," I said, "I haven't the slightest idea either. But this I do know: the Major never does anything without a reason and he has a positive genius for making money out of the most unlikely situations. Take my worthless Michigan swampland, for example. We gave that away and made $20,000 in the process."

"Really?" Andrews said. He sounded more than a little interested.

"Really," I said.

"Very interesting," Andrews murmured and looked thoughtfully over at the old building.

Not long after that the Major finished his inspection and came back to join us.

"Well, Major," Andrews said, "what's your decision?"

The Major shrugged. "It's hard to say," he said. "The basic structure is sound, but it would take considerable work

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getting it in usable condition. And, of course," he added, smiling, "a lot would depend on the kind of financial arrangements that could be worked out. But perhaps we can discuss those over dinner this evening."

"With pleasure, Major," Andrews said and put the car in gear. You could almost see him rubbing his hands together.

At the Major's suggestion we ate at Horsley's Restaurant. As a gesture of courtesy to Carol Ferguson for giving us the card of admittance, he said. But I wasn't surprised—nor, I suspect, was Andrews—when after the meal the Major leaned back expansively and suggested we take a look in at the gambling room. "After all," he said, "you can't talk business forever. All work and no play, you know."

Andrews hesitated, then nodded. "I suppose it would be foolish," he said, "to have gotten this close and then go away without seeing what the place looks like."

"You've never been here before?" I said.

He gave me an oblique look and shook his head. "I'm no gambler," he said. "When I lay out money, I like the return to be calculated in advance."

Carol Ferguson's card admitted us into the gambling room without question. It was a standard layout, most of the action centering around a large craps table at one end of the room with a scattering of roulette wheels and other games occupying the rest of the room. Just for something to do, I bought a $10 stack of chips, lost it in fifteen minutes betting against the shooters at the craps table, then went over to rejoin Andrews and the Major watching the play at one of the roulette tables.

We were just about getting ready to leave when I spotted Carol Ferguson coming toward us. She was wearing a long hostess-type gown and had pinned her hair up in a stylish knot, but her smile was as friendly and bright as ever.

"Fancy meeting you here," she said. "Enjoying yourselves?"

"Well, yes," the Major said.

She caught the undertone in his voice and cocked her head to one side. "What's the matter?" she said. "Don't tell me they've wiped you out already?"

"No," the Major said. "But I was hoping you'd have some card tables. Poker's more my game than either dice or roulette."

"Sorry," she said. "We can't offer you poker. Not enough action for the house. All we

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have in the way of cards is faro."

The Major's head came up smartly. "All?" he said. "Why, I didn't think anybody played faro any more."

"We do here," she said. "It's Mr. Horsley's specialty."

"I don't think I've ever heard of the game," I said.

"Well, my boy, it's time you did," the Major said, "because faro's the Game That Won the West and even when I was a boy it was *the* game to play. So much so, it was practically an American institution. But then like the buffalo and the nickel cigar it just seemed to vanish. Until today. Oh, I tell you, my boy—Andrews—we just can't pass this by without giving it a whirl."

Miss Ferguson looked at him dubiously. "Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it," she said. "It's a pretty high-stakes game and I wouldn't want you to get in over your head."

"Don't you worry about that, my dear," the Major said. "I learned to swim a long time ago just so I could go in over my head."

"Well, all right," she said. "They keep moving it from place to place for security. Tonight it's at Room 622 at the Madison House Hotel. I'll phone ahead to let them know you're coming."

"Fine," the Major said. He turned back to us, beaming. "Well, Tom—Andrews—shall we?"

Andrews shrugged. "I've come this far," he said. "I'll go all the way with you."

The door to Room 622 opened as far as the safety chain would permit and an eye and half a face peered through the crack. The Major held up Carol Ferguson's card for inspection. The man behind the door nodded, then opened up to let us enter.

It was a typical hotel room, except that the bed had been pushed to one side to make space for a table around which eight men were gathered. They all turned to give us a quick once-over as we came in and there was a flurry of mumbled introductions. But the only names that stuck were Jensen, the smooth-faced youth who had let us in, and Thorkill, the dealer.

The latter was a burly man in his late forties with the battered face and bulging muscles of the professional boxer. But for all his bulk there was no musclebound clumsiness about him. His thick-fingered hands cut and shuffled and dealt with surprising dexterity.

In some respects, though, his skill was wasted. Because,

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American institution or not, faro is really a simple game and, unless you're involved in the betting, about as interesting to watch as dominoes.

All thirteen spades from ace to king are laid out on the table and the players place their bets on them to indicate whether they think a specific card will win or lose. When all bets are down, the dealer deals two cards face up off the top of the deck. The first is a "loser," the second a "winner." The house pays those who bet against the loser or on the winner, and collects all other bets. And then the whole thing starts all over again.

It has only one advantage—if advantage is the right word. It's fast and you can win or lose a lot of money in an extremely short time. As witness: it took the Major exactly fifteen minutes longer to lose the $300 in chips he bought than it had taken me to lose my $10 back at the main gambling room.

"Well," the Major said, pushing his chair back, "I'm afraid that cleans me out."

"Too bad," Thorkill said dispassionately. "But nobody goes away from my table with nothing to show for his time. Jensen, take the gentlemen downstairs and buy them a drink. Then come right back up. I need you to spell me while I run over to the main house."

"Yes, sir," Jensen said and ushered us out.

Riding down in the elevator, I said, "That was a pretty expensive exercise in nostalgia, Major."

"That it was, my boy," the Major said. "However, $300 won't break me—although I won't deny I'd rather have the money than the experience."

Jensen shifted his feet nervously. "I'm taking a chance opening my mouth," he said. "But you did Carol a good turn this afternoon, and Carol and I—well, I just can't stand by and see a friend of hers cheated without saying something."

The elevator doors slid open and we stepped out into the lobby. "Cheated?" the Major said.

Jensen nodded. "Thorkill was palming cards. He cheated you blind."

"I see," the Major said. He sighed. "Well, thank you for telling me anyway."

" 'Thank you for telling me'!" Andrews said. "Is that all you're going to do about it?"

"I'm afraid there's not much else I can do," the Major said. "If we try to face Thorkill with no more proof than we have, he'll simply laugh in our faces, and the net result will be to get our young friend here in trouble."

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"That's exactly right," Jensen said. "And if you go to the law—well, Bob Horsley has the law in his back pocket and Thorkill is Horsley's right-hand man."

"So he gets away with it," Andrews said bitterly.

"Well, maybe not," Jensen said. "I can't just give you your money back, Major. But I can do this. When I go back up, I'm going to be replacing Thorkill as dealer, and I can palm cards with the best of 'em. You come and get back in the game after he leaves and I'll fix it so you can win your $300 back. After that, it's up to you. You can quit then or you can continue to play with the understanding that as long as I'm dealing it'll be an honest game after that."

"Major," I said, "don't do it. It sounds too much like a come-on."

Jensen flushed. "I made my offer," he said, "and it stands. But if you want to kiss your $300 goodbye, it's okay with me."

The Major was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "I'm afraid I'm out of cash. Would you accept a check?"

"Under the circumstances," Jensen said, "sure. But you'd better give it to me down here. I don't want to set a precedent by letting some of the others upstairs see it."

"Of course," the Major said. Then they went together to the hotel desk to ask for a blank check and stood there for a few moments while the Major filled it out. Then Jensen took the check and went over to the elevator. The Major came back to where Andrews and I had remained standing.

"You just made a big mistake, Major," I said.

"Perhaps so, my boy," the Major said. "But nothing ventured, nothing gained. And I think you can trust the old Major to look out for himself."

"I hope so," I said. "But you're sure not giving me much basis for trust."

He just gave me a smug smile for reply. And not long afterward the elevator came down and Thorkill got out and strode past us. The Major let him get clear out of the building, then headed toward the elevator.

I turned to Andrews and spread my hands helplessly. "I hope I'm wrong about this," I said. "But just in case I'm not, we'd better stick with him to make sure he doesn't get burned too badly."

Andrews nodded and followed the Major with me.

Jensen let us in as before, slipping the Major a stack of chips as he passed by. Then the Major took his former seat and play started in earnest.

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I made it a point to stand directly in back of the Major and to watch Jensen closely. He wasn't quite as good with cards as Thorkill, but he was good enough and if I hadn't been watching for them I never would have seen him palming the "winners" he slipped in.

When the Major's winnings reached the $300 mark, I tapped him on the shoulder. "Time to call it quits," I said.

"Nonsense, my boy," he said. "We've just gotten back to where we started and the way to go from there is upward and forward."

"All right," I said. "But I want you to promise me that you will quit as soon as you lose that $300 back."

The Major nodded. "Agreed," he said. "*If* I lose it back."

And he didn't. He won. Not every turn, of course. But consistently enough and for ever-increasing stakes so that when the game broke up shortly after 2:00 A.M. the pile of chips in front of him had grown to staggering proportions.

"Count it up for me, will you, my boy?" he said to Jensen.

Jensen's hands moved swiftly, stacking and tallying chips. "Over $35,000," he said when he had finished. "$35,310 to be exact."

An almost reverent hush fell over the room at the mention of that much money.

"That's a lot more than I can cover with what I've got on hand," Jensen said. "So I'll have to give you an I.O.U. on Horsley. You don't have to worry, though. Horsley's never welches on a debt."

"I'm sure of that, my boy," the Major said, beaming. "But if you don't mind, I'll take my check back as part payment."

"What check?" a harsh voice said. It was Thorkill standing just inside the doorway and glowering into the room.

"My check, of course," the Major said. "The one the lad here was good enough to accept to let me get back into the game."

Thorkill advanced on Jensen who quailed before him. "What's wrong with you, Jensen? First you forget to chain the door so anybody could have busted in on you. And then you let some guy play with a check that could be just so much worthless paper."

"I resent that," the Major said.

"I'll bet you do," Thorkill said, swinging around on him. "But resent it or not, the rule's the rule. And we don't let guys play on checks."

"By George," the Major exclaimed, "I see what you're

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doing. You're using this as an excuse to bilk me out of my winnings."

"That's exactly what he's doing," Andrews chimed in. He thrust his pale face out at Thorkill. "Well, let me tell you, you're not going to get away with it. I'll see to it that your name and Horsley's will stink in this county."

Thorkill made little placating motions with his hands. "Now, everybody cool it," he said. "Nobody's trying to bilk anybody out of anything. I'm just not going to be fourflushed, that's all. You'll get your I.O.U. all right, Major. It'll be for the full amount *and* it'll be conditional on your check clearing through the banks without a hitch. Fair enough?"

The Major just stared at him stonily. Finally Andrews spoke. "I don't see how you can really object to that, Major," he said. "The man's only taking an elementary precaution."

"All right," the Major said shortly and accepted the I.O.U. that Thorkill offered him. Then the Major, Andrews, and I left.

Once we were away from the building, the Major laughed wryly. "Well, easy come, easy go," he said and held up the I.O.U. as if to tear it in two.

"What are you doing?" Andrews cried, shocked. "That's worth over $35,000 when your check clears your bank."

"That's just the trouble," the Major said. "The check isn't going to clear. Because, like Tom, I suspected Jensen's offer might be just a come-on. So I covered myself by buying back into the game with a rubber check. But now it seems that all I did was outsmart myself."

"Maybe not," I said. "It's bound to take a couple of days for that check to clear the local banks. So all you have to do is get enough money into the bank you wrote it on to cover it before it gets there."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," the Major said, "because there is no such bank. I just wrote down the first name that occurred to me." He gave another short wry laugh. "Maybe there's a lesson to be learned here. Nobody can win 'em all."

"You can win this one, though, Major," Andrews said quietly.

"Can I, by George? How?"

"It's so simple I'm surprised you didn't think of it yourself. As I told you, Horsley has his account at my bank, and that's where he'll present your check."

"Of course," the Major exclaimed. "All you have to do is honor it and Horsley and Thorkill will have to pay off."

"Precisely," Andrews said.

"Andrews," the Major said,

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"if you'll do this for me—"

"I wasn't thinking of doing it for *you*, Major," Andrews said. "I was thinking of doing it for *us*. Shall we say a partnership? Fifty-fifty on your winnings."

"Fifty—" the Major began, then broke off and smiled. "Well," he said, "you're asking a lot, but I suppose half of something is better than all of nothing. You have a deal, sir."

"I thought you'd see it that way," Andrews said. "But just in case you're tempted to change your mind, *I'll* hold the I.O.U. until we go to cash it. You see," he added, smiling, "you're not the only one who knows how to protect himself."

"So it would seem," the Major said sadly, handing over the paper.

And on that we parted.

Shortly before noon the next day there was a knock on our hotel-room door. I got up, trailing the newspaper I'd been reading, to answer it.

It was Thorkill. "Hi," he said and walked right past me.

"Ah, there you are," the Major said. "Any difficulty at the bank?"

"None whatsoever," Thorkill said. "Andrews boggled a little when he saw the check was for $5000, but in the end he paid over like the little gentleman he is. I took out $500 to cover paying off the others plus $1000 for myself. That leaves $3500 for you two."

"As agreed," the Major said, accepting the money Thorkill offered him. "How long do we have?"

"A couple of hours at least," Thorkill said. "Andrews wanted to know when you could cash in the I.O.U. I said Horsley would be out of town until three this afternoon but to come out any time after that."

"In that case, my boy," the Major said to me, "I suggest we waste no time. Because as soon as our banker friend discovers that Horsley did not have a faro layout here at the hotel last night and in fact has never had one, he's bound to realize that everything from our interest in that disaster of a building to meeting Carol on the road to the faro room was simply a setup to get him to pay $5000 on a worthless check. And discretion would seem to dictate that we be a long way from here when that moment of truth hits him."

Q

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a LEW ARCHER detective story by

ROSS MACDONALD

In 1973 the Popular Culture Association of Bowling Green University, Bowling Green, Ohio, initiated a new annual Merit Award. The first award went to Ross Macdonald. This is surely a prestigious honor, and we congratulate Mr. Macdonald as the first recipient of what may come to be called, in this acronymic age, the PCAMA of BGU.

GUILT-EDGED BLONDE

by ROSS MACDONALD

A man was waiting for me at the gate at the edge of the runway. He didn't look like the man I expected to meet. He wore a stained tan windbreaker, baggy slacks, a hat as squashed and dubious as his face. He must have been 40 years old, to judge by the gray in his hair and the lines around his eyes. His eyes were dark and evasive, moving here and there as if to avoid getting hurt. He had been hurt often and badly, I guessed.

"You Archer?"

I said I was. I offered him my hand. He didn't know what to do with it. He regarded it suspiciously, as if I was planning to try a Judo hold on him. He kept his hands in the pockets of his windbreaker.

"I'm Harry Nemo." His voice was a grudging whine. It cost him an effort to give his name away. "My brother told me to come and pick you up. You ready to go?"

"As soon as I get my luggage."

I collected my overnight bag at the counter in the empty waiting room. The bag was very heavy for its size. It contained, besides a toothbrush and spare linen, two guns and the ammunition for them. A .38 special for sudden work, and a .32 automatic as a spare.

Harry Nemo took me outside to his car. It was a new seven-passenger custom job, as

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long and black as death. The windshield and side windows were very thick, and they had the yellowish tinge of bullet-proof glass.

"Are you expecting to be shot at?"

"Not me." His smile was dismal. "This is Nick's car."

"Why didn't Nick come himself?"

He looked around the deserted field. The plane I had arrived on was a flashing speck in the sky above the red sun. The only human being in sight was the operator in the control tower. But Nemo leaned toward me in the seat, and spoke in a whisper:

"Nick's a scared pigeon. He's scared to leave the house. Ever since this morning."

"What happened this morning?"

"Didn't he tell you? You talked to him on the phone."

"He didn't say very much. He told me he wanted to hire a bodyguard for six days, until his boat sails. He didn't tell me why."

"They're gunning for him, that's why. He went to the beach this morning. He has a private beach along the back of his ranch, and he went down there by himself for his morning dip. Somebody took a shot at him from the top of the bluff. Five or six shots. He was in the water, see, with no gun handy. He told me the slugs were splashing around him like hailstones. He ducked and swam under water out to sea. Lucky for him he's a good swimmer, or he wouldn't of got away. It's no wonder he's scared. It means they caught up with him, see?"

"Who are 'they,' or is that a family secret?"

Nemo turned from the wheel to peer into my face. His breath was sour, his look incredulous. "Hell, don't you know who Nick is? Didn't he tell you?"

"He's a lemon-grower, isn't he?"

"He is now."

"What did he used to be?"

The bitter beaten face closed on itself. "I oughtn't to be flapping at the mouth. He can tell you himself if he wants to."

Two hundred horses yanked us away from the curb. I rode with my heavy leather bag on my knees. Nemo drove as if driving was the one thing in life he enjoyed, rapt in silent communion with the engine. It whisked us along the highway, then down a gradual incline between geometrically planted lemon groves. The sunset sea glimmered red at the foot of the slope.

Before we reached it, we turned off the blacktop into a private lane which ran like a

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straight hair-parting between the dark green trees. Straight for half a mile or more to a low house in a clearing.

The house was flat-roofed, made of concrete and field-stone, with an attached garage. All its windows were blinded with heavy draperies. It was surrounded with well-kept shrubbery and lawn, the lawn with a ten-foot wire fence surmounted by barbed wire.

Nemo stopped in front of the closed and padlocked gate, and honked the horn. There was no response. He honked the horn again.

About halfway between the house and the gate a crawling thing came out of the shrubbery. It was a man, moving very slowly on hands and knees. His head hung down almost to the ground. One side of his head was bright red, as if he had fallen in paint. He left a jagged red trail in the gravel of the driveway.

Harry Nemo said, "Nick!" He scrambled out of the car. "What happened, Nick?"

The crawling man lifted his heavy head and looked at us. Cumbrously, he rose to his feet. He came forward with his legs spraddled and loose, like a huge infant learning to walk. He breathed loudly and horribly, looking at us with a dreadful hopefulness. Then he died on his feet, still walking. I saw the change in his face before it struck the gravel.

Harry Nemo went over the fence like a weary monkey, snagging his slacks on the barbed wire. He knelt beside his brother and turned him over and palmed his chest. He stood up shaking his head.

I had my bag unzipped and my hand on the revolver. I went to the gate, "Open up, Harry."

Harry was saying, "They got him," over and over. He crossed himself several times. "The dirty bastards."

"Open up," I said.

He found a key ring in the dead man's pocket and opened the padlocked gate. Our dragging footsteps crunched the gravel. I looked down at the specks of gravel in Nicky Nemo's eyes, the bullet hole in his temple.

"Who got him, Harry?"

"I dunno. Fats Jordan, or Artie Castola, or Faronese. It must have been one of them."

"The Purple Gang."

"You called it. Nicky was their treasurer back in the thirties. He was the one that didn't get into the papers. He handled the payoff, see. When the heat went on and the gang got busted up, he had some money in a safe-deposit box. He was the only one that got away."

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"How much money?"

"Nicky never told me. All I know, he come out here before the war and bought a thousand acres of lemon land. It took them fifteen years to catch up with him. He always knew they were gonna, though. He knew it."

"Artie Castola got off the Rock last spring."

"You're telling me. That's when Nicky bought himself the bullet-proof car and put up the fence."

"Are they gunning for you?"

He looked around at the darkening groves and the sky. The sky was streaked with running red, as if the sun had died a violent death.

"I dunno," he answered nervously. "They got no reason to. I'm as clean as soap. I never been in the rackets. Not since I was young, anyway. The wife made me go straight, see?"

I said, "We better get into the house and call the police."

The front door was standing a few inches ajar. I could see at the edge that it was sheathed with quarter-inch steel plate. Harry put my thoughts into words.

"Why in hell would he go outside? He was safe as houses as long as he stayed inside."

"Did he live alone?"

"More or less alone."

"What does that mean?"

He pretended not to hear me, but I got some kind of answer. Looking through the doorless arch into the living room, I saw a leopardskin coat folded across the back of the chesterfield. There were red-tipped cigarette butts mingled with cigar butts in the ashtrays.

"Nicky was married?"

"Not exactly."

"You know the woman?"

"Naw." But he was lying.

Somewhere behind the thick walls of the house there was a creak of springs, a crashing bump, the broken roar of a cold engine, grinding of tires in gravel. I got to the door in time to see a cerise convertible hurtling down the driveway. The top was down, and a yellow-haired girl was small and intent at the wheel. She swerved around Nick's body and got through the gate somehow, with her tires screaming.

I aimed at the right rear tire, and missed. Harry came up behind me. He pushed my gun arm down before I could fire again. The convertible disappeared in the direction of the highway.

"Let her go," he said.

"Who is she?"

He thought about it, his slow brain clicking almost audibly. "I dunno. Some pig that Nicky picked up someplace. Her name is Flossie or Florrie or

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something. She didn't shoot him, if that's what you're worried about."

"You know her pretty well, do you?"

"The hell I do. I don't mess with Nicky's dames." He tried to work up a rage to go with the strong words, but he didn't have the makings. The best he could produce was petulance. "Listen, mister, why should you hang around? The guy that hired you is dead."

"I haven't been paid, for one thing."

"I'll fix that."

He trotted across the lawn to the body and came back with an alligator billfold. It was thick with money.

"How much?"

"A hundred will do it."

He handed me a hundred-dollar bill. "Now how about you amscray, bud, before the law gets here?"

"I need transportation."

"Take Nicky's car. He won't be using it. You can park it at the airport and leave the key with the agent."

"I can, eh?"

"Sure. I'm telling you you can."

"Aren't you getting a little free with your brother's property?"

"It's my property now, bud." A bright thought struck him, disorganizing his face. "Incidentally, how would you like to get off of my land?"

"I'm staying, Harry. I like this place. I always say it's people that make a place."

The gun was still in my hand. He looked down at it.

"Get on the telephone, Harry. Call the police."

"Who do you think you are, ordering me around? I took my last order from anybody, see?" He glanced over his shoulder at the dark and shapeless object on the gravel, and spat venomously.

"I'm a citizen, working for Nicky. Not for you."

He changed his tune very suddenly. "How much to go to work for me?"

"Depends on the line of work."

He manipulated the alligator wallet. "Here's another hundred. If you got to hang around, keep the lip buttoned down about the dame, eh? Is it a deal?"

I didn't answer, but I took the money. I put it in a separate pocket by itself. Harry telephoned the county sheriff.

He emptied the ashtrays before the sheriff's men arrived, and stuffed the leopardskin coat into the woodbox. I sat and watched him.

We spent the next two hours with loud-mouthed deputies. They were angry with the dead

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man for having the kind of past that attracted bullets. They were angry with Harry for being his brother. They were secretly angry with themselves for being inexperienced and incompetent. They didn't even uncover the leopardskin coat.

Harry Nemo left the courthouse first. I waited for him to leave, and tailed him home, on foot.

Where a leaning palm tree reared its ragged head above the pavements there was a court lined with jerry-built frame cottages. Harry turned up the walk between them and entered the first cottage. Light flashed on his face from inside. I heard a woman's voice say something to him. Then light and sound were cut off by the closing door.

An old gabled house with boarded-up windows stood opposite the court. I crossed the street and settled down in the shadows of its veranda to watch Harry Nemo's cottage. Three cigarettes later a tall woman in a dark hat and a light coat came out of the cottage and walked briskly to the corner and out of sight. Two cigarettes after that she reappeared at the corner on my side of the street, still walking briskly. I noticed that she had a large straw handbag under her arm. Her face was long and stony under the streetlight.

Leaving the street, she marched up the broken sidewalk to the veranda where I was leaning against the shadowed wall. The stairs groaned under her decisive footsteps. I put my hand on the gun in my pocket, and waited. With the rigid assurance of a WAC corporal marching at the head of her platoon, she crossed the veranda to me, a thin high-shouldered silhouette against the light from the corner. Her hand was in her straw bag, and the end of the bag was pointed at my stomach. Her shadowed face was a gleam of eyes, a glint of teeth.

"I wouldn't try it if I were you," she said. "I have a gun here, and the safety is off, and I know how to shoot it, mister."

"Congratulations."

"I'm not joking." Her deep contralto rose a notch. "Rapid fire used to be my specialty. So you better take your hands out of your pockets."

I showed her my hands, empty. Moving very quickly, she relieved my pocket of the weight of my gun, and frisked me for other weapons.

"Who are you, mister?" she said as she stepped back. "You can't be Arturo Castola, you're not old enough."

"Are you a policewoman?"

"I'll ask the questions. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for a friend."

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"You're a liar. You've been watching my house for an hour and a half. I tabbed you through the window."

"So you went and bought yourself a gun?"

"I did. You followed Harry home. I'm Mrs. Nemo, and I want to know why."

"Harry's the friend I'm waiting for."

"You're a double liar. Harry's afraid of you. You're no friend of his."

"That depends on Harry. I'm a detective."

She snorted. "Very likely. Where's your buzzer?"

"I'm a private detective," I said. "I have identification in my wallet."

"Show me. And don't try any tricks."

I produced my photostat. She held it up to the light from the street, and handed it back to me. "So you're a detective. You better do something about your tailing technique. It's obvious."

"I didn't know I was dealing with a cop."

"I was a cop," she said. "Not any more."

"Then give me back my .38. It cost me seventy dollars."

"First tell me, what's your interest in my husband? Who hired you?"

"Nick, your brother-in-law. He called me in Los Angeles today, said he needed a bodyguard for a week. Didn't Harry tell you?"

She didn't answer.

"By the time I got to Nick, he didn't need a bodyguard, or anything. But I thought I'd stick around and see what I could find out about his death. He was a client, after all."

"You should pick your clients more carefully."

"What about picking brothers-in-law?"

She shook her head stiffly. The hair that escaped from under her hat was almost white. "I'm not responsible for Nick or anything about him. Harry is my responsibility. I met him in line of duty and I straightened him out, understand? I tore him loose from Detroit and the rackets, and I brought him out here. I couldn't cut him off from his brother entirely. But he hasn't been in trouble since I married him. Not once."

"Until now."

"Harry isn't in trouble now."

"Not yet. Not officially."

"What do you mean?"

"Give me my gun, and put yours down. I can't talk into iron."

She hesitated, a grim and anxious woman under pressure. I wondered what quirk of fate or psychology had married her to a hood, and decided it must

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have been love. Only love would send a woman across a dark street to face down an unknown gunman. Mrs. Nemo was horsefaced and aging and not pretty, but she had courage.

She handed me my gun. Its butt was soothing to the palm of my hand. I dropped it into my pocket. A gang of boys at loose ends went by in the street, hooting and whistling purposelessly.

She leaned toward me, almost as tall as I was. Her voice was a low sibilance forced between her teeth:

"Harry had nothing to do with his brother's death. You're crazy if you think so."

"What makes you so sure, Mrs. Nemo?"

"Harry couldn't, that's all. I know Harry, I can read him like a book. Even if he had the guts, which he hasn't, he wouldn't dare to think of killing Nick. Nick was his older brother, understand, the successful one in the family." Her voice rasped contemptuously. "In spite of everything I could do or say, Harry worshiped Nick right up to the end."

"Those brotherly feelings sometimes cut two ways. And Harry had a lot to gain."

"Not a cent. Nothing."

"He's Nick's heir, isn't he?"

"Not as long as he stays married to me. I wouldn't let him touch a cent of Nick Nemo's filthy money. Is that clear?"

"It's clear to me. But is it clear to Harry?"

"I made it clear to him, many times. Anyway, this is ridiculous. Harry wouldn't lay a finger on that precious brother of his."

"Maybe he didn't do it himself. He could have had it done for him. I know he's covering for somebody."

"Who?"

"A blonde girl left the house after we arrived. She got away in a cherry-colored convertible. Harry recognized her."

"A cherry-colored convertible?"

"Yes. Does that mean something to you?"

"No. Nothing in particular. She must have been one of Nick's girls. He always had girls."

"Why would Harry cover for her?"

"What do you mean, cover for her?"

"She left a leopardskin coat behind. Harry hid it, and paid me not to tell the police."

"Harry did that?"

"Unless I'm having delusions."

"Maybe you are at that. If you think Harry paid that girl to shoot Nick, or had anything—"

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"I know. Don't say it. I'm crazy."

Mrs. Nemo laid a thin hand on my arm. "Anyway, lay off Harry. Please. I have a hard enough time handling him as it is. He's worse than my first husband. The first one was a drunk, believe it or not." She glanced at the lighted cottage across the street, and I saw one-half of her bitter smile. "I wonder what makes a woman go for the lame ducks the way I did."

"I wouldn't know, Mrs. Nemo. Okay, I lay off Harry."

But I had no intention of laying off Harry. When she went back to her cottage, I walked around three-quarters of the block and took up a new position in the doorway of a dry-cleaning establishment. This time I didn't smoke. I didn't even move, except to look at my watch from time to time.

Around eleven o'clock the lights went out behind the blinds in the Nemo cottage. Shortly before midnight the front door opened and Harry slipped out. He looked up and down the street and began to walk. He passed within six feet of my dark doorway, hustling along in a kind of furtive shuffle.

Working very cautiously, at a distance, I tailed him downtown. He disappeared into the lighted cavern of an all-night garage. He came out of the garage a few minutes later, driving an old Chevrolet.

My money also talked to the attendant. I drew an old Buick which would still do 75. I proved that it would as soon as I hit the highway. I reached the entrance to Nick Nemo's private lane in time to see Harry's lights approaching the dark ranchhouse.

I cut my lights and parked at the roadside a hundred yards below the entrance to the lane, and facing it. The Chevrolet reappeared in a few minutes. Harry was still alone in the front seat. I followed it blind as far as the highway before I risked my lights. Then down the highway to the edge of town.

In the middle of the motel and drive-in district he turned off onto a side road and in under a neon sign which spelled out *TRAILER COURT* across the darkness. The trailers stood along the bank of a dry creek. The Chevrolet stopped in front of one of them, which had a light in the window. Harry got out with a spotted bundle under his arm. He knocked on the door of the trailer.

I U-turned at the next corner and put in more waiting time. The Chevrolet rolled out under the neon sign and turned to-

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ward the highway. I let it go.

Leaving my car, I walked along the creek bank to the lighted trailer. The windows were curtained. The cerise convertible was parked on its far side. I tapped on the aluminum door.

"Harry?" a girl's voice said. "Is that you, Harry?"

I muttered something indistinguishable. The door opened, and the yellow-haired girl looked out. She was very young, but her round blue eyes were heavy and sick with hangover, or remorse. She had on a nylon slip, nothing else.

"What is this?"

She tried to shut the door. I held it open.

"Get away from here. Leave me alone. I'll scream."

"All right. Scream."

She opened her mouth. No sound came out. She closed her mouth again. It was small and fleshy and defiant. "Who are you? Law?"

"Close enough. I'm coming in."

"Come in then, damn you. I got nothing to hide."

"I can see that."

I brushed in past her. There were dead Martinis on her breath. The little room was a jumble of feminine clothes, silk and cashmere and tweed and gossamer nylon, some of them flung on the floor, others hung up to dry. The leopardskin coat lay on the bunk bed, staring with innumerable bold eyes. She picked it up and covered her shoulders with it. Unconsciously, her nervous hands began to pick the wood chips out of the fur.

"Harry did you a favor, didn't he?" I said.

"Maybe he did."

"Have you been doing any favors for Harry?"

"Such as?"

"Such as knocking off his brother?"

"You're way off the beam, mister. I was very fond of Uncle Nick."

"Why run out on the killing then?"

"I panicked," she said. "It would happen to any girl. I was asleep when he got it, see, passed out if you want the truth. I heard the gun go off. It woke me up, but it took me quite a while to bring myself to and sober up enough to put my clothes on. By the time I made it to the bedroom window, Harry was back, with some guy." She peered into my face. "Were you the guy?"

I nodded.

"I thought so. I thought you were law at the time. I saw Nick lying there in the driveway, all bloody, and I put two and two together and got trouble. Bad trouble for me, unless I got out.

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So I got out. It wasn't nice to do, after what Nick meant to me, but it was the only sensible thing. I got my career to think of."

"What career is that?"

"Modeling. Acting. Uncle Nick was gonna send me to school."

"Unless you talk, you'll finish your education at Corona. Who shot Nick?"

A thin edge of terror entered her voice. "I don't know, I tell you. I was passed out in the bedroom. I didn't see nothing."

"Why did Harry bring you your coat?"

"He didn't want me to get involved. He's my father, after all."

"Harry Nemo is your father?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to do better than that. What's your name?"

"Jeannine. Jeannine Larue."

"Why isn't your name Nemo if Harry is your father? Why do you call him Harry?"

"He's my stepfather, I mean."

"Sure," I said. "And Nick was really your uncle, and you were having a family reunion with him."

"He wasn't any blood relation to me. I always called him uncle, though."

"If Harry's your father, why don't you live with him?"

"I used to. Honest. This is the truth I'm telling you. I had to get out on account of the old lady. The old lady hates my guts. She's a real creep, a square. She can't stand for a girl to have any fun. Just because my old man was a rummy—"

"What's your idea of fun, Jeannine?"

She shook her feathercut hair at me. It exhaled a heavy perfume which was worth its weight in blood. She bared one pearly shoulder and smiled an artificial hustler's smile. "What's yours? Maybe we can get together."

"You mean the way you got together with Nick?"

"You're prettier than him."

"I'm also smarter, I hope. Is Harry really your stepfather?"

"Ask him if you don't believe me. Ask him. He lives in a place on Tule Street—I don't remember the number."

"I know where he lives."

But Harry wasn't at home. I knocked on the door of the frame cottage and got no answer. I turned the knob, and found that the door was unlocked. There was a light behind it. The other cottages in the court were dark. It was long past midnight, and the street was deserted. I went into the cottage, preceded by my gun.

A ceiling bulb glared down on sparse and threadbare furni-

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ture, a time-eaten rug. Besides the living room, the house contained a cubbyhole of a bedroom and a closet kitchenette. Everything in the poverty-stricken place was pathetically clean. There were moral mottoes on the walls, and one picture. It was a photograph of a towheaded girl in a teen-age party dress. Jeannine, before she learned that a pretty face and a sleek body could buy her the things she wanted. The things she thought she wanted.

For some reason I felt sick. I went outside. Somewhere out of sight an old car engine muttered. Its muttering grew on the night. Harry Nemo's rented Chevrolet turned the corner under the streetlight. Its front wheels were weaving. One of the wheels climbed the curb in front of the cottage. The Chevrolet came to a halt at a drunken angle.

I crossed the sidewalk and opened the car door. Harry was at the wheel, clinging to it desperately as if he needed it to hold him up. His chest was bloody. His mouth was bright with blood. He spoke through it thickly:

"She got me."

"Who got you, Harry? Jeannine?"

"No. Not her. She was the reason for it, though. We had it coming."

Those were his final words. I caught his body as it fell sideways out of the seat. Laid it out on the sidewalk and left it for the cop on the beat to find.

I drove across town to the trailer court. Jeannine's trailer still had light in it, filtered through the curtains over the windows. I pushed the door open.

The girl was packing a suitcase on the bunk bed. She looked at me over her shoulder, and froze. Her blonde head was cocked like a frightened bird's, hypnotized by my gun.

"Where are you off to, kid?"

"Out of this town. I'm getting out."

"You have some talking to do first."

She straightened up. "I told you all I know. You didn't believe me. What's the matter, didn't you get to see Harry?"

"I saw him. Harry's dead. Your whole family is dying like flies."

She half turned and sat down limply on the disordered bed. "Dead? You think I did it?"

"I think you know who did. Harry said before he died that you were the reason for it all."

"Me the reason for it?" Her eyes widened in false naïveté, but there was thought behind

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them, quick and desperate thought. "You mean Harry got killed on account of me?"

"Harry and Nick both. It was a woman who shot them."

"God," she said. The desperate thought behind her eyes crystallized into knowledge. Which I shared.

The aching silence was broken by a big diesel rolling by on the highway. She said above its roar:

"That crazy old bat. So *she* killed Nick."

"You're talking about your mother. Mrs. Nemo."

"Yeah."

"Did you see her shoot him?"

"No. I was blotto like I told you. But I saw her out there this week, keeping an eye on the house. She's always watched me like a hawk."

"Is that why you were getting out of town? Because you knew she killed Nick?"

"Maybe it was. I don't know. I wouldn't let myself think about it."

Her blue gaze shifted from my face to something behind me. I turned. Mrs. Nemo was in the doorway. She was hugging the straw bag to her thin chest.

Her right hand dove into the bag. I shot her in the right arm. She leaned against the door frame and held her dangling arm with her left hand. Her face was granite in whose crevices her eyes were like live things caught.

The gun she dropped was a cheap .32 revolver, its nickel plating worn and corroded. I spun the cylinder. One shot had been fired from it.

"This accounts for Harry," I said. "You didn't shoot Nick with this gun, not at that distance."

"No." She was looking down at her dripping hand. "I used my old police gun on Nick Nemo. After I killed him, I threw the gun into the sea. I didn't know I'd have further use for a gun. I bought that little suicide gun tonight."

"To use on Harry?"

"To use on you. I thought you were on to me. I didn't know until you told me that Harry knew about Nick and Jeannine."

"Jeannine is your daughter by your first husband?"

"My only daughter." She said to the girl, "I did it for you, Jeannine. I've seen too much—the awful things that can happen."

The girl didn't answer.

"I can understand why you shot Nick," I said, "but why did Harry have to die?"

"Nick paid him," she said. "Nick paid him for Jeannine. I

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found Harry in a bar an hour ago, and he admitted it. I hope I killed him."

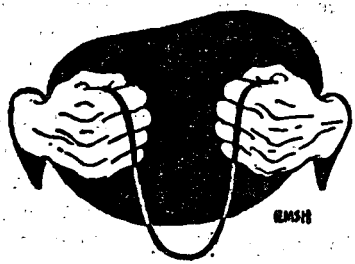
"You killed him, Mrs. Nemo. What brought you here? Was Jeannine the third on your list?"

"No. No. She's my own girl. I came to tell her what I did for her. I wanted her to know."

She looked at the girl on the bed. Her eyes were terrible with pain and love.

The girl said in a stunned voice, "Mother. You're hurt. I'm sorry."

"Let's go, Mrs. Nemo," I said.



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a *NEW* Scott Jordan story by

HAROLD Q. MASUR

The first story by Harold Q. Masur to be published in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine was "The $2,000,000 Defense," in our May 1958 issue, more than 15 years ago. Would you like to know the subsequent publishing history of that one short story? The day after the story's appearance on newsstands television rights were purchased for "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," and the show has been rerun at least twice. The story appeared in more than a dozen foreign magazines, even behind the Iron Curtain (in Hungary), and has been anthologized in three hardcover collections. What does all this mean in coin of the realm? We paid Mr. Masur $250 for the first magazine serial rights in 1958, and since then the story has earned about $4000, and all this supplementary income went directly to Mr. Masur. (Who says short stories don't pay?)

Now we give you Mr. Masur's first story to appear in EQMM since his "Squealer's Reward," in our June 1962 issue, nearly 12 years ago. This new story is the first Scott Jordan case to be published in EQMM—a hard-hitting, fast-moving, fast-reading story of a lawyer-detective . . .

LAWYER'S HOLIDAY

by HAROLD Q. MASUR

What Maury Faber did was inexcusable. Perhaps even illegal. At 7:15 A.M. he used a passkey and invaded my hotel room. He clamped his fingers around my shoulder and unceremoniously shook me awake.

Three days ago I had checked into the Everglades Hotel on Florida's west coast for a week of rest and recreation, which meant sleeping until noon. Ordinarily I am not a slugabed, but I had just finished a long and complicated trial,

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working around the clock, in court during the day and studying transcripts at night.

So I bitterly resented the intrusion. Prying open a grainy eye, I gave the man a hard look. Almost any sight on God's green footstool would be more pleasing than Faber's kisser first thing in the morning. It was pale and meaty, dominated by a heavy nose, and well matched to the short barrel-shaped body he invariably kept garbed in the latest most fashionable resort style. Acquiring a passkey had been no problem for Maury Faber. He was president and managing director of the joint.

"What the hell, Maury!" I said.

"Up." His voice was harshly urgent. "Get dressed, Jordan. I need you."

"It's unilateral. I don't need you, not at this hour."

"It's an emergency. A crisis. Please."

"I'm a lawyer, not a doctor."

"It's too late for doctors."

"Then call an undertaker. Damn it, Maury, I'm on vacation. Go away." I closed my eyes and rolled over.

He yanked the blanket away and dropped it on the floor. "You're a lawyer and right now that's what I need, Jordan—a lawyer. It's your job to help people in trouble, isn't it?"

"Why me?" I asked, my voice muffled against the pillow. "I'm not even admitted to the bar in this state. You've got a whole battery of lawyers down here."

"They know real estate, period. Conveyances, leases, mortgages. What do they know about homicide? Besides, the dead man is a friend of yours."

"Who?"

"Gifford—Sam Gifford."

I sat up, suddenly wide-awake. "What? What did you say?"

"I said Sam Gifford is dead."

"Oh, my God! How?"

"Shot."

"Where?"

"Through the heart."

"I mean where did it happen?"

The question wrung an agonized groan from Faber. "In my wife's cabana," he said, and added hastily, "but that's not where he got it. He was shelved elsewhere and brought there."

I looked at him narrowly. "How do you know?"

"No blood in the cabana. Not a drop." Despite the air conditioning Faber's pores were exuding moisture. It glistened on his forehead and ran down his cheeks.

"How come you don't move him the hell out of there?"

"It's too late." He groaned again. "The chambermaid who

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found him started yelling and before we could do anything somebody called the law."

"All right, Maury. You don't miss much around here. I want the truth. Was your wife fooling around with Gifford?"

"Don't say that." His voice was up a full octave. "Don't even think it. Carmen doesn't fool around with the guests. Or anybody," he added hopefully. "She hardly knew the man." He pressed his palms together in a gesture of supplication. "Jordan, please. A favor. Name your own fee. Anything. I don't care how much. The corporation will pay."

One vacation shot to hell. I sighed and slid out of bed. "Okay. Let's see what's cooking."

He scuttled to the door and blocked my path. "Put some clothes on, for God's sake."

Which indicates the state of mind I was in.

Lieutenant George Ritchie was a leathery character, a native Floridian, a spare, tight-lipped man with a flinty face hermetically sealed against any show of emotion. He had commandeered the manager's office and he showed himself briefly at the door, ordering one of his troopers to keep us outside until he finished interrogating Maury's wife.

It must have been a painful ordeal. Ultimately she emerged, pale and shaken. She threw us a helpless look and was quickly hustled away. Carmen Faber was a decorative item, with clothes by Givenchy and face by Max Factor. Exactly what you'd expect Maury to latch onto after his first wife yielded the ghost.

Ritchie glanced indifferently at my card. "New York lawyer," he said, sizing me up, then transferring his gaze to Faber. "You think you need a mouthpiece, Maury?"

"For advice, yes. I'm worried about the hotel. This is not exactly my idea of good publicity. Mr. Jordan happens to be here on vacation. He once did some work for me up north, so I asked him to sit in. Besides, he knew the victim."

"Ah. Well, we'll come to that in a moment. So you're worried about the hotel. Not your wife?"

"What's to worry, Lieutenant? She's clean."

"The body was found in her cabana."

"Found maybe, but not killed there."

Ritchie had obviously reached the same conclusion. "How well did she know this Gifford?"

"Hardly at all. He'd only been here a few days."

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"I understand she had a few drinks with him."

"She enjoys mingling with the guests, makes them feel at home."

Ritchie shifted to me. "All right, Counselor. Would you care to brief me on the victim?"

I was going to do it whether I cared to or not. I said, "Samuel P. Gifford. Professional money raiser. He coaxes contributions out of prospective donors for political campaigns. He could charm the wallet away from the most confirmed miser."

"Was he down here on vacation or business?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant. He asked to sit at my table and we exchanged only small talk."

"Any family you know of?"

"No."

"So who do we notify?"

"Try the Republican State Committee in New York," I said.

"How well did you know him?"

"I handled his divorce two years ago."

Ritchie nodded. "Wait here for me, Counselor." He headed for the door, beckoning to Faber. "Get me the key to Gifford's room. We'll have a look at that right now."

They marched out, leaving me alone. I sat behind the manager's desk and reached for the phone. I dialed the operator and got through to Mike Ryan at campaign headquarters for the reelection of Theodore Hoke Prentice to the United States Senate. Ryan was the senator's campaign manager. We exchanged amenities to background noises of ringing telephones and the busy chatter of many voices.

"You sound far away, Counselor," Ryan said. "Where are you calling from?"

"Florida."

"I guess I'm in the wrong business. Anything special on your mind?"

"Sam Gifford. Is he working for you at the moment?"

"He sure is. Matter of fact, he's in Florida right now."

"You can scratch him off the payroll."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"He's dead."

Silence. Static on the line for a few moments. I could picture Ryan's shocked face. When he finally got wired for sound he asked for details. I gave him what I had, admittedly not much. He thought about it, then reached a decision, sounding subdued. "Would you look into it for us, Jordan?"

"I may not have enough time," I said. "I'm due back in New York at the end of the week."

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"Then give it a few days. Please. We owe Gifford that much at least. And send your bill to the committee. I'm sure the senator will concur and he'd be most grateful."

I didn't mind having a U.S. senator in my debt, although in this instance I differed in almost every conceivable respect from any position Theodore Hoke Prentice had ever taken. He was a flag-waving reactionary, espousing tough law enforcement and weak labor unions. I already had a client, but there didn't seem to be any conflict of interest, so I agreed.

"I'll need some information, Mike."

"Shoot."

"Was Gifford down here on business?"

"Yes. He was trying to contact old Amos Rhodes. Does the name ring a bell?"

"Negative."

"That's understandable. Rhodes is a queer old duffer, sort of a recluse, been out of circulation for years. Made this pile on Wall Street, selling short before the crash of '29 and then riding it up during the long bull market of the fifties and sixties. After that he retired. Divides his time now between Florida and a place down in Mexico—wait a minute, I have it on a piece of paper—town called San Miguel Allende.

"Just before the election four years ago he sent Prentice a letter praising the senator's voting record. We turned it over to Gifford, thinking Rhodes might be good for a contribution. The letter was postmarked Palm City, Florida. Gifford flew down there, got an interview with Rhodes, put the bite on him, and what do you know, the old man coughed up twenty-five grand. That's a lot of beans, Counselor.

"So now with the senator up for reelection, we thought Rhodes might shell out again. But he failed to answer our letters and Gifford decided to fly down last week and see him personally. You know the score, Jordan. Advertising and TV spots skyrocketing in cost, we need all the financial help we can get."

"Any luck?"

"So far Gifford hadn't notified us. But our boy was a bulldog. He didn't discourage easily and whatever the difficulty he'd be hanging in there making his pitch until the subject came across or dropped dead from a heart attack."

"Just for the record, did Gifford have any enemies?"

Ryan hesitated. "Not down there certainly, but Sam was a notorious chaser, as you probably know, which could mean husband trouble."

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"How about Rhodes? Does he have a wife?"

Ryan chuckled. "Amos Rhodes is well over eighty, and a bachelor. Look, Jordan, can you soft-pedal this thing where the senator is concerned?"

I was silent. Theodore Hoke Prentice was no favorite of mine. After a moment I said, "This is not my bailiwick. I carry no clout down here. If it doesn't come up, I won't mention it." And on that note we hung up.

In the morgue of the local newspaper I found only one item on Amos Rhodes, written six years ago. Some enterprising lensman had managed a quick shot of him through the window of a limousine. The caption stated that he had arrived on his annual hegira to the isolated estate 14 miles inland. Even then he was a parched and rheumy-eyed antique with patches of flour-white hair clinging to a pale and bony skull.

Anyone who can dash off a check for $25,000 probably had local bank connections. Maury Faber arranged a meeting for me with an official of the First Florida Trust, housed in a small limestone structure, pseudo-Moorish in style. I have found that bankers generally disgorge information with all the abandon of a slot machine, but the Everglades Hotel was First Florida Trust's largest depositor and Mr. Briscoe anxiously wished to retain Maury Faber's good will; so he agreed to cooperate so long as he did not have to breach conventional ethics. A thin seamed man with a lidless stare, he conceded that Amos Rhodes did have an account at the bank.

"Have you ever met him personally?" I asked.

"Once. When he opened the account ten years ago."

"And he's made regular deposits since that time?"

"Yes, on a monthly basis whenever he's in Florida—until quite recently, that is."

"But not in person, I take it."

"No, sir. Sometimes by mail, and sometimes his housekeeper, Mrs. Alma Hull, would drive into Palm City to shop, make a deposit, and cash one of his checks. But the account has been rather dormant lately and I suspect Mr. Rhodes must have made other arrangements."

"What is the current source of his income? Dividends, bond interest?"

A look of intense pain crossed Briscoe's face as he shook his head. "Mr. Jordan, I shouldn't be saying this, but it's my impression Mr. Rhodes has become senile. He seems to

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have liquidated all his holdings and used the cash to buy himself a straight life annuity with an insurance company. I'm sure you know what that means."

I nodded. "The investor turns his money over to the company in exchange for a guaranteed lifetime income. If he's old enough he gets the highest possible income, and when he dies that finishes it. No refund, no estate, nothing. The insurance company keeps the rest of the investment."

It turned Briscoe livid. "Asinine," he said, resentment shading into outrage. "Utter fiscal imbecility. He must have developed hardening of the brain."

I knew what ailed the man. How could banks lend money at a profit if depositors placed their funds elsewhere? "Did you make inquiries?"

"Yes. I was curious about it. A man sharp enough to make all that money in the first place had to have some sense. Well, sir, we do some business with the insurance company and my contact there told me that Mr. Rhodes is afflicted with a certain phobia. He dies a little every time he has to pay taxes. That's a fairly common disorder, except Rhodes had it to the point of monomania. In his bracket he considered the government bite confiscatory. He was positively paranoic about it. So he turned to an annuity."

I mulled it over. To an eccentric like Rhodes it probably made sense. At his advanced age he might get fourteen percent on his investment. And since the Internal Revenue Service considered this income a partial return of capital, most of it would be tax deductible. And since Rhodes had no family or relatives, why leave an estate? He'd have a princely income for life all to himself. And he could squander it as he pleased, including making contributions to the campaign of Senator Theodore Hoke Prentice.

At my request Briscoe drew a road map of the area marked with arrows and instructions on how to reach the Rhodes retreat. The local Hertz office provided me with a rental car and I took off.

For seclusion the old man had picked an ideal spot. I had to drive inland along a canal, past pine and palmetto scrub. An occasional oak bearded with Spanish moss lined the neglected blacktop. There was almost no traffic in either direction. In the distance I spied a blue heron stalking the shallows.

I found the Rhodes place guarded by a stone wall with a wrought-iron gate. It was not

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locked, so I drove through. Hibiscus hedges concealed the lower half of a rambling structure. I pulled up under a porte-cochère alongside a shining new sports car.

As I climbed out of my rental a young man in a white T-shirt emerged from the front door and slouched down the steps to head me off. He was deeply bronzed and heavily muscled, with slate-colored eyes under a dark ridge of brow. "Something I can do for you?" he asked politely.

"I'd like to see Mr. Amos Rhodes."

"Do you have an appointment?"

I shook my head and offered one of my cards. "I've come a long way and it's important."

He smiled apologetically. "Well, Mr. Jordan, if my vocal cords were up to it I'd be happy to give him your message."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"It's simple. Mr. Rhodes returned to his villa in Mexico two days ago."

"I see. Are you the caretaker here?"

"You might say that. My mother works for Mr. Rhodes and he allows me to stay at the place whenever he's away."

"Then your name must be Hull."

"Correct. Burt Hull."

"Perhaps you can help me. Have you been here during the past week?"

"I have."

"Would you know if a man named Sam Gifford drove out to see Mr. Rhodes?"

He shook his head. "Not a chance. Mr. Rhodes doesn't like visitors. He hasn't permitted a stranger to see him in over a year."

"How long will he be staying in Mexico?"

"Permanently. That's a decision he made some time ago. He prefers the climate down there. As a matter of fact, he's asked me to put this house on the market and I'll be talking to real estate agents in the next few days." Burt Hull kept smiling, arms folded across his chest.

I thanked him and went back to the car.

Faber was pacing back and forth in his lobby like a big cat whose cage has been missed at feeding time. He ran over and clamped his fingers on my arm. Agitation made him almost incoherent.

"Slow down, Maury," I said soothingly. "Remember, you have high blood pressure. You'll pop a blood vessel. What's eating you?"

"They took Carmen away. Lieutenant Ritchie is holding

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her as a material witness. You gotta do something, Jordan. You gotta spring her. All this luxury around here; she's not used to a cell. She'll go bananas. She—"

I cut him short. "Does he have any new evidence?"

Faber looked ill, his eyelids twitching. "They found a ring under the corner of a rug in Gifford's room. A three-carat solitaire I bought her last year in Palm Beach. She swears she never went to Gifford's room, but Ritchie won't listen. He doesn't believe her."

I thought about it. Holding Carmen was the lieutenant's way of taking her out of circulation while he tried to build a case. A writ of habeas corpus might bring her home, but I had no time to fool around with legal formalities. Faber's local talent could handle that angle and I told him so. I pointed to the desk of a travel agent in the far corner of the lobby.

"Do you have an account with that outfit?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I want you to get me on the first available flight to Mexico City." I forestalled his objections with an upraised hand. "I'm not looking for a free trip, Maury. I have to go down there for some information about Gifford. Relax. I should be back in a few days."

He was dubious and confused. When he saw that I was implacable, he relented, shrugged in resignation, and headed for the travel desk. Fifteen minutes later he brought a round-trip ticket to my room.

"You'll need a tourist card," he told me. "The man says you can pick one up at the Mexican Tourist Department in Miami. Your plane leaves from Miami International tomorrow morning. Start packing."

The Eastern Airlines jet dipped into the terminal leg of its landing pattern and I heard the flaps thump as the pilot lowered them to reduce air speed. We hit the runway without a bounce, high on the central plateau, still almost a mile and a half above sea level. I moved my watch back one hour. Customs was a brief formality and the hotel room Faber had reserved for me was a pleasant surprise.

Early the next morning I was on a bus heading north. I had planned on renting a car, but one look at the suicidal machismo of Mexican drivers dissuaded me. The bus was air conditioned and had a stewardess who served coffee and cold drinks.

We sped northwest on a good highway, cutting through dry plains blistered by a re-

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morseless sun and dotted in the distance by shapeless villages. Four hours later, from the crest of a steep hill, I spotted San Miguel Allende, a Colonial town that looked as if it hadn't changed for generations.

I'd heard it was an expatriate haven for pensioners, artists, writers, and a sprinkling of that ubiquitous breed of hirsute youngsters.

The bus wound down cobbled streets past pink, yellow, and salmon walls that insure the privacy of the houses within. Churchbells were pealing for no apparent reason, certainly not for my arrival. Despite all the resident gringos, it was a totally alien culture. I saw Indios in wide-brimmed straw hats, women with rebozos, squatting mendicants, and ragged boys hawking gum and an English-language newspaper which I later found was of limited interest.

On the Plaza Principal I checked into the San Francisco Hotel and then spent the rest of the day familiarizing myself with the terrain. Late in the afternoon I settled myself at a conspicuous table of a sidewalk café, ordered Mexican beer, and put a warm friendly smile on my face. In due course I struck up a conversation with a middle-aged couple who had retired to San Miguel a few years ago, had not returned to the United States since, and were starved for gossip about New York. I regaled them with stories for half an hour and eventually got what I needed.

Their local lawyer represented a large segment of the American community. Still active at 70 he had an encyclopedic knowledge of the town and its population. They said they would arrange an appointment for me and told me to be at his office at eleven the next morning.

Senor Ignacio Arruza, *el abogado*, was a gnarled and fragile antique with the courtly manners of a Spanish grandee. His office contained only the barest essentials, but the furnishings beneath his scalp seemed more than adequate. And his English was far better than my Spanish. After exchanging a few legal bromides he asked, "In what way, Senor Jordan, may I serve you?"

"There is a norteamericano here named Amos Rhodes. Do you know him?"

Arruza nodded, informing me that he had handled details for the purchase of the Rhodes villa in San Miguel, ownership of property being a complicated procedure for foreigners. "It has been many years now and there have been no legal prob-

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lems since. Senor Rhodes is a man of much privacy. He is old, much older than myself. He does not mingle with his countrymen. He secludes himself behind the walls of his villa. His *enferman*, a sort of nurse and housekeeper, takes care of him. Heavy work and marketing is usually done by a *criada*, a maid."

"A Mrs. Hull is the nurse-housekeeper?"

"That is so. A silent one, a sour creature, not friendly."

"What about the maid?"

Senor Arruza displayed fine porcelain dentures with a gold tooth winking among them. "Ah, Senor Jordan. Maria Sanchez, a most splendid one. But she is no longer employed. She has been dismissed. I saw her strolling in the Jardin yesterday and we spoke. The Hull woman told her to leave and Maria does not know why."

"Has anyone taken her place?"

"Maria says no. Perhaps they are economizing." Arruza frowned. "But that would be most unusual. Help here is inexpensive." He gave me a short course on the attractions of the dollar vis-a-vis the peso. "Most norteamericanos have several *criadas* working for them. There is no industry in San Miguel and the local girls need work."

I asked him how to find the Rhodes villa and he wrote out precise instructions in Spanish, suggesting that I use one of the taxis on the Plaza.

The taxi, a junkyard relic, rattled ominously on the rough cobblestones, but its engine had apparently been tended with loving skill, and it pulled us up a steep hill to a sparsely settled area, stopping finally at high cement wall that must have been built about the time Juarez finished off Maximilian.

"You will be long, Senor?" the driver asked. "Perhaps I should wait for you."

"*Por favor.*"

Above a door of heavy zebra wood dangled a pullcord that jangled a bell somewhere inside. I kept it working until the upper half of the door opened to reveal the solid torso of a woman in her fifties. Thin-lipped, stern-visaged, an American-Gothic face, inhospitable, and armored against any show of emotion or civility.

"Mrs. Hull?" I asked.

"Yes. What do you want?"

"I'd like to see Amos Rhodes."

"Mr. Rhodes does not care to see anyone. Who are you?"

"I'm an attorney. I've come a long way on an important matter."

"Important to you perhaps, not to Mr. Rhodes."

"Would you tell him that

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I'm here on behalf of Theodore Hoke Prentice, a member of the United States Senate?" I handed her a card.

"Wait here." The door snapped shut in my face.

It was hot and I began to perspire. Five minutes later she appeared again. "Mr. Rhodes says he never heard of you. American politics no longer interests him. He wishes to be left alone." This time the door closed with unchallengeable finality.

I turned and saw the driver hunkered down under a tree. A motionless car under the Mexican sun quickly becomes an oven. He held the door for me and my pores opened wide. To save fuel we coasted down the long hill.

"Would you know a girl named Maria Sanchez?"

"Si, Senor. She is the friend of my daughter. They walk together on the *paseo*." He explained that most of the town's younger population congregated there on Saturday evenings in the traditional ritual of circling the Jardin, boys strolling in one direction, girls in the other.

"This is the same girl who worked for Senor Rhodes?"

"Si. But no longer. She was—how you call it?—fired."

"You know where she lives?"

"Less than a mile away, Senor."

"Please take me there."

At the bottom of the hill he turned onto a rutted road and presently pulled up at a cluster of adobe structures. Two goats and a cow wandered aimlessly on the unpaved street. Large-eyed, impassively solemn children gathered to watch us. My driver entered one of the houses. In a moment he emerged, trailed by a young girl, exuberantly healthy, who acknowledged my bow with an ear-to-ear smile.

"This is Maria Sanchez, Senor. She does not have much English."

What she had was about four words, so I drafted the driver as an interpreter. He rattled my inquiries in Spanish and got back rapid-fire replies. They raced their words as if the devil were chasing each phrase.

"Maria says that Senora Hull arrived two days ago. *Solo*. Alone. Senor Rhodes did not come with her. She told Maria that he had remained in the states because he was too ill to travel. Maria was not surprised. She says the *patron* was very sick when they left here to go to the states. We have many fine *medicos* here in San Miguel, but Senora Hull did not trust them." He shrugged. "For one person a maid was not

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necessary, so Maria was dismissed."

I produced a twenty-dollar bill. "Mr. Rhodes would like Senorita Sanchez to have severance pay."

When the girl understood, she put her hands behind her back, shaking her head.

The driver apologized. "She says it would be charity, Senor. She has not earned the money and she will not take it."

I did not offend her by insisting. "*Muchas gracias, Senorita,*" I said gravely and climbed back into the cab. The driver looked at me. "The office of *el abogado*, Ignacio Arruza," I told him. "And where did you learn your English?"

"Migrant farm worker in the states," he grinned. "And driving a hack in El Paso."

When I added a tip to his fare, an unusual procedure in Mexico, he shook my hand gratefully. I found Senor Arruza dozing at his desk. I sat across from him and waited quietly. In five minutes one eye opened and the eyebrow above it lifted inquiringly.

"Would it be possible to find out whether Senor Rhodes arrived in this country on a specific day earlier this week?"

"There are many points of entry, Senor Jordan."

"He would have flown from Miami to Mexico City."

That simplified it. Arruza spread his fingers. If modest sums of money were to change hands, he explained, the money to be judiciously distributed, certain bureaucrats would undoubtedly be inclined to cooperate. He gave me an approximate total figure and I placed the cash on his desk. He had a contact in Mexico City who would take care of it at once.

Outside, the sun was now directly overhead and stores were shuttering for the afternoon siesta. I crossed the Plaza to my hotel and stretched out to indulge in the local custom. Before sleep came I pondered the situation. Burt Hull had claimed Amos Rhodes was in Mexico. Mrs. Hull had tried to give the impression he was in seclusion in his villa. But according to what she had told Maria Sanchez, Rhodes had never arrived in San Miguel. So somebody was lying. And I didn't think it was Maria.

Afternoon shadows had darkened the room when Senor Arruza's call awakened me. He'd heard from his contact at the capital. Mrs. Alma Hull, he told me, had flown down by herself from Miami via Aero de Mexico. Amos Rhodes had not been on the plane and there was no record of his arrival.

That was all I needed to know.

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So it was time to leave. I now had plenty of assumptions and a few conclusions, but nothing solid enough to assure Lieutenant Ritchie's cooperation. What I needed was a court order. But no judge in his right mind would sign the necessary papers based only on wild speculation.

From behind his desk at the First Florida Trust in Palm City, Mr. Briscoe regarded me without pleasure. As I spoke, he went through a whole series of emotional changes—annoyance, resentment, uneasiness, and finally irresolution. It took me nearly a half hour to convince him that his records were not sacrosanct, that sooner or later, one way or another, if not at my request, then at the request of the local prosecutor, he would have to comply.

Ultimately he called a filing clerk and gave instructions. Records were brought. Amos Rhodes had received a monthly check from an insurance company in payment of his annuity contract. A number of these had been deposited to his account at the First Florida Trust. Before clearing, they had been microfilmed. Briscoe had enlarged copies of the first two and the last three.

I brought them back to my room at the Everglades. I am not a handwriting expert, but in a recent case involving a forged will I had been carefully coached by one of the best. I placed the last three checks on top of each other and held them flat against a window pane, shifting them until the endorsed signatures of Amos Rhodes were precisely superimposed. An expert would have used an oblique sheet of glass illuminated from behind by a bright lamp. The windowpane was primitive but adequate.

I knew that it is impossible for anyone to sign his or her name twice in exactly the same way. Yet in each of the three superimposed signatures I could not detect a single millimeter's difference in the shape or size of the letters.

So they had all been traced from a single writing, probably an authentic one, in the hand of Amos Rhodes.

The next step called for a search warrant on the application of a law-enforcement official. I took my theories and the copies of the canceled checks to Lieutenant Ritchie. He listened without expression. His narrowed eyes studied the checks. It changed the shape of his mouth, pulling it tight. "I'm calling the county attorney in on this," he said. "Any objections?"

"It's your bailiwick."

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He stood up. "We'll get a court order and go over there tomorrow morning."

"Am I invited?"

"Be on deck here at ten A.M. sharp."

"Would it be possible to release Mrs. Faber?"

"Not now. She stays on ice until we see what turns up."

There were five of us in the official car—myself, Lieutenant Ritchie, two of his deputies, and an eager young assistant county attorney. We drove past marshland to the Amos Rhodes estate. Burt Hull's sports car was parked in the courtyard. No one answered the doorbell. I imagined him peering through a window, hoping we would depart.

Ritchie nodded to one of his deputies. "Hit it, Bruback."

The deputy backed up and launched 200 pounds of bulk at the door. On his second try it flew open, splintering wood around the lock. They drew their guns and went in at a crouch. No one was at home.

I went out to the terrace, sat on a canvas chair, and watched the deputies remove two sharp-edged spades from the trunk compartment of Ritchie's car. The lieutenant was prowling the grounds like a bloodhound. Finally he paused near one of the hedges and gestured. The men began to dig. They got down pretty deep. Ritchie peered sourly into the hole and then indicated another spot. An hour later the deputies were leaning on their spades, looking discouraged.

I wandered over. "You're not going to find anything."

Ritchie gave me a startled look.

"Burt Hull is not an idiot," I said. "We're close to alligator country. I think Amos Rhodes has long since been digested. If you could drain the swamps you might find his skeleton. Hull would have had to cart the body off in a car, that sports job, so there might be some evidence there."

Ritchie nodded. "We'll impound it for the lab boys, but let's have a quick look first."

They examined the interior. Then Bruback used the spade to spring the lid of the trunk. Ritchie rummaged around. He hefted a small bundle of rags and when he unwrapped it a revolver was resting on his palm.

"Well, now," he said. "The counselor may be onto something. A .32 caliber Short Colt, taking a .315 diameter bullet. Which squares exactly with the slug we dug out of your friend Sam Gifford."

The county attorney grew excited. "A ballistics check

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would lock it up. Let's go back and do it now."

Ritchie shook his head. "Burt Hull is in the area. He can't be far off without wheels. If he comes back and finds the house door broken and his car missing he'll hightail it out of here fast. So we sit tight and put the arm on him when he shows."

He deployed his men out of sight and stationed me and the county attorney at different windows. I was on my third cigarette when Hull sauntered in off the road. They let him get close. Then I saw Bruback materialize behind him and the other deputy move in at an angle. Ritchie stepped out on the terrace.

Hull pulled up short. His head swiveled and he saw the deputies. He protested, smiling tautly, as they hustled him into the house. "Hey, now! What goes on here? What's this all about?"

"We're trying to locate Mr. Amos Rhodes," Ritchie said.

"That's easy. He's in Mexico."

"No," I said. "Hasn't your mother called to tell you I was down there?"

"All right. Where do you think he is?"

"Rotting in some nearby swamp—what's left of him anyway."

Hull met my eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a dead man. Amos Rhodes. A man who probably died from old age. But you and your mother decided to keep it a secret. Because once the news was out it would cut off the income. All those monthly payments on his nice fat lifetime annuity—they'd all stop. So you never told anyone and carted off the body and fed it to the big lizards. That kept the checks coming and you and your mother continued to cash them."

The taut smile congealed. Hull turned to Ritchie. "This guy is crazy."

"It won't wash," I said. "The Mexicans are sticklers for paperwork. There's no record Rhodes ever arrived down there. You're caught, Hull. You want to throw off the hook, produce him."

"I don't have to produce him. Mr. Rhodes is a free agent. He wants to go somewhere else, that's his privilege."

"He was an old man. Sick. Helpless. Unable to take care of himself. Where could he go without your mother's help?"

"Maybe he hired somebody else."

"Then why did she lie and give the impression he was in San Miguel?"

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"That's your story. She'll say otherwise."

"You still insist Rhodes is alive?"

"Yes."

"Where is he getting money? Who's supporting him?"

"That annuity you were talking about."

"Impossible. Somebody's been forging his endorsements and pinching the cash. If Rhodes is alive, why didn't he complain to the insurance company?"

Hull gave a forced and hollow laugh, but bubbles of sweat had broken out on his forehead. "How do I know? He never consulted me about his problems. For all I know you may be lying about the forgeries."

"No, sir. We have evidence that will convince the insurance company. And they'll stop payment pending an investigation."

"I welcome it."

"Even if it includes the murder of Sam Gifford?"

"Now, wait a minute! You can't tie me into that."

"We can tie you into possession of the murder gun," Ritchie said. "A Short Colt we found in your car. Exactly the type of weapon that killed Gifford."

It jolted him, draining the blood from his face. His voice shook. "Why would I kill the man? Hell, I didn't even know him."

"Because he came down here to put the bite on Rhodes for a campaign contribution. You tried to fob him off, but he wouldn't let go. A Gifford characteristic. He began nosing around, got wind of something, and suddenly it looked like the end of the ball game for you. You were afraid he'd blow the whistle, so you had to silence him. You killed him and then tried to throw a curve by dumping him in Mrs. Faber's cabana because you saw them having a drink together at the Everglades bar."

He swallowed painfully. "You can't prove anything like that."

"Your gun will prove it for us. When ballistics matches it with the slug found in Gifford's skull, you're sunk, finished, kaput."

He knew what ballistics would show and his body sagged. His eyes were bankrupt.

Ritchie said, "You'll have your day in court, mister. That's more than you gave Gifford."

"Q"

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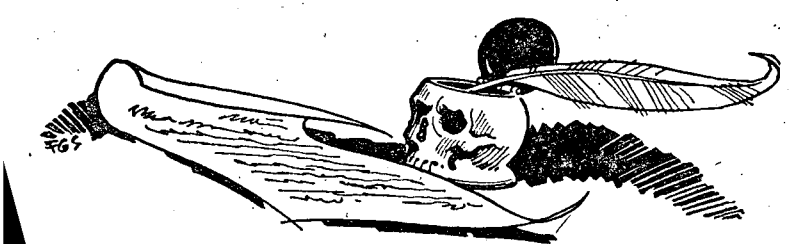

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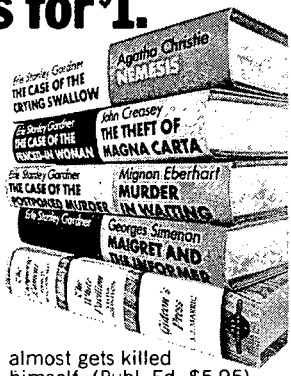

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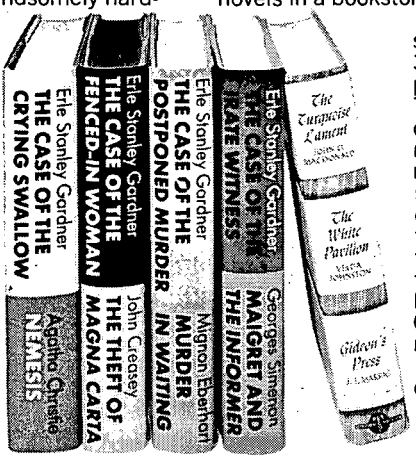

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